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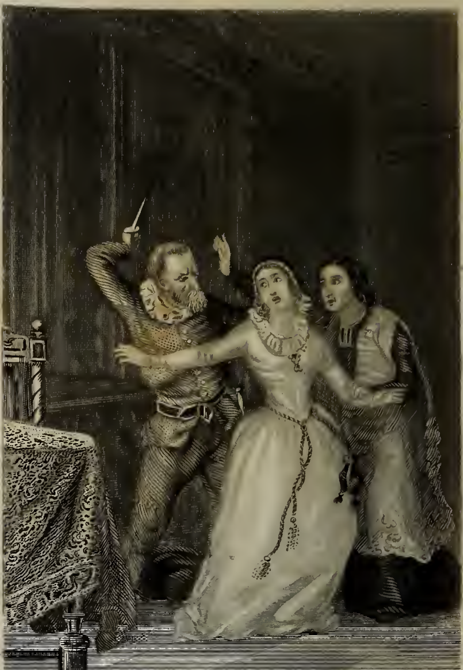

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THE

CASTLE OF ROUSSILLON;

OR

Quercy in the Sixteenth Century.

A TALE.

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH OF
MADAME EUGENIE DE LA ROCHERE.

BY
Mrs. J. Sadlier.

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THE TRANSLATORS PREFACE

It has been frequently objected to that these French tales, have exclusive reference to the higher classes of society—that their scenes and incidents are all amongst the refined and educated, who being, of course, the fewest in every country, ought by no means to engross the attention of the moralist. But the answer is plain; if the object of all these compositions be the illustration of the incomparable beauty of Religion, it matters little from what class the actors in the drama are drawn. True it may be said that the virtues of a Countess differ somewhat from those of a poor seamstress, the wife or daughter of a farmer or mechanic—but the difference is only on the surface, the same Gospel is to regulate the actions of all classes, and the precepts which govern and direct the rich, apply also to the poor. All can not practise the heroic virtues of the young Lady of Rousillon, or the holy priest, her brother, because all are not visited by so great calamities—few have such injuries to bear, and very few indeed, have titles and estates to sacrifice, but every one can practise these virtues within their own sphere of action. There is not one of my readers, I am quite sure, who may not derive some profit from the perusal of this unpretending volume, for when they come to reflect upon its moral, they will find it to be: "*Love thine enemies—do good to those who hate and persecute thee!* and again; *Serve the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy strength.*" Surely these precepts are applicable to every grade of society, and I flatter myself that none will find fault with the hero or the heroine purely because they chance to be the son and daughter of a noble family.

MONTREAL, October 26, 1850.

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THE
CASTLE OF ROUSSILLON;
OR,
QUERCY IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY.

INTRODUCTION.

About two and a half leagues from Cahors, in the township of Maxou, are seen the ruins of the ancient Castle of Roussillon, crowning the summit of a dome-shaped mountain, which is joined solely by a very narrow causeway (so narrow as to be impassable) to the great table-land from which it would appear to have been rent by some violent convulsion of nature. A good stone bridge now stretches across the intervening chasm, giving free access to the castle, which of old was only reached by means of a drawbridge. Four distinct piles of building form an oblong square around the principal court-yard, now overgrown with thorns and brambles. The outer walls composed of regular blocks of stone, joined together by a very hard cement, were in former days flanked by lofty towers, terminating in pointed spires, but now these caps have fallen away, and the whole is draped with a thick curtain of ivy, yet is the whole mass of architecture so imposing in its grandeur and in its apparent strength that it seems to bid defiance to the storms of ages. Still at intervals neither few nor far between, some fragment of stone detached from the height of the lofty walls rolls down with a loud crash into the chasm below, as though to remind the traveller that even the proudest and mightiest works of man are subject to decay.

This castle having been constructed in the feudal times, is principally remarkable for its vast dungeons, which were made to contain upwards of five hundred prisoners. Alas! how many have pined and languished in these dreary prisons, the victims of their own evil passions or those of others! what myriads of dismal associations hang like shadows around those time-worn walls!—Full many a mournful drama has been therein enacted of which the world shall never know:—how much of self-denying and heroic virtue have these walls witnessed, and how much of human weakness, mingled with crime of every shade and die. Tears have here fallen both in joy and in sorrow, and the merry laugh has rung through the now roofless halls, but now all is silent—never again shall the voice of gladness or of grief awake the echoes of the place, for man has given it over to the empire of decay. Amongst other deeds of infamy whose gloomy memories enshroud these stupendous ruins, there is one which fills the mind with horror, and it is related in an ancient chronicle. The legend is that a monster unworthy of the name of man, took an unnatural revenge on his own daughter for having despised his authority, and the chamber wherein the atrocious act was perpetrated was thence-forward known as the Devil's Chamber, seeing that even previous to that time it had been the scene of many a foul crime.

Few there are who can view these noble ruins without emotion, for they naturally carry the mind back to long-past ages, and to generations long since mouldered into dust. Imagination, powerful as the prophet's breath, gives flesh and life to the crumbling bones in the neighbouring chapel, and beholds them as they were in days of yore—queenly ladies, robed in velvet and brocade, and haughty steel-clad nobles—some of both sexes cruel, and arrogant—others mild, and courteous, and compassionate. Like us, they were once full of life, its desires, and its passions, but now what remains of their greatness, and their pride, and their power?—Alas! on earth they are no more remembered—they have long since been swallowed up in the waves of oblivion, and before God alone do they exist, either happy or unutterably wtretched, according as they spent the term of their earthly probation.

In 1534, while yet the six towers of the castle tapered proudly towards the heavens, and on every façade was seen the honoured escutcheon of the lords of Roussillon, and the slope of the mountain, opposite to the forest of oaks which still remains, was brilliant with the richest flowers, an event occurred in that lordly family, calculated to shed joy and gladness amongst its numerous vassals and dependents.

It was the opening of that charming month when according to the ancient custom of Quercy, lovers planted the May-bush at the doors of their chosen fair ones, and some unusual impulse seemed to have set all the country round in motion. The bell of the castle-chapel rang out a joyous peal during that whole day; the labourers left their toilsome occupation, while the women, with their children, and the young village maidens in blue petticoat and black bodice, with a broad straw hat garlanded with flowers, all hastened to their pleasant task of adorning with green boughs, a triumphal arch erected in the midst of the court-yard. Within the castle a similar bustle was going on, for there the gaily-liveried *lacqueys* were busily engaged rubbing up the old Gothic furniture and dusting the rich tapestry and hangings; and the *major-domo* himself was arranging the massive silver plate on the side-board (or rather dresser); in the grand hall—garnishing with fresh flowers the porphyry urns, and placing wax tapers in the silver candelabras. From time to time this dignified official, (to whom neither servant nor peasant presumed to speak but hat in hand,) interrupted his own work to inspect that of his assistants, chiding some, encouraging others, but always with the gravity which became his high office.

The sun was rapidly nearing the western horizon and yet no signal blast from the warder's horn. Already were the anxious watchers beginning to testify their impatience in fretful murmurs, when hark! the thrilling sound of the horn was three times heard from above, and on the instant a brilliant cavalcade was seen on the brow of the opposite mountain.

"Bestir yourselves, children!" cried Martial aloud, and in obedience to his voice twelve young girls with dark, radiant eyes and sun-browned features, stept forth and ranged themselves two and two on the left hand side of the triumphal arch, their jet black tresses but half concealed by small round caps of snow-white linen. Six of these held baskets of flowers, while the other six bore as many doves. A similar number of boys took their places directly opposite, carrying each some rural offering, such as honeycombs, fruit, &c. The remaining space, with the exception of the path left for the cavalcade, was filled with an immense crowd of the vassals male and female, and no sooner had the expected party drawn up on the esplanade, than a joyous shout of welcome burst forth from every lip. In front of the *cortège*, on a milk-white palfrey, caparisoned with scarlet and gold, rode a lady of queenly bearing, whose robe, of the richest brocade was composed of the mingled colours of Ysam and Roussillon, and studded with pearls and rubies; her slender waist was encircled by a golden zone, and a coronet of diamonds crowned her lofty brow. By her side rode a young man of a pale, and rather delicate countenance, whose deep blue eyes gave to his every feature a look of thoughtful sweetness. His whole air and bearing were singularly mild, yet did he manage his jet-black courser with the utmost ease and dexterity, and as one possessing the full vigour of early manhood. Nothing could well be more graceful than the form and deportment of this young noble—the one being full of symmetry and the other a singular combination of gentleness and dignity. His hair was cut short, but his beard was long, in conformity with the fashion recently introduced by Francis the First. Indeed his whole attire was that of a courtier of that monarch, with his puff-sleeved doublet and his short cloak thrown carelessly over his shoulder. The costume was completed by a velvet cap with a snowy plume.

These were followed by a long train of stately knights and noble ladies, all vieing with each other in the magnificence of their attire. "Long live our noble lord, the illustrious Count Galliot, and our new lady, the Countess de Roussillon!" Such were the acclamations poured forth on every side as the noble pair advanced towards the castle.

At the entrance of the court-yard, Galliot leaped from his saddle and held the bridle for the countess while she alighted. She then moved majestically under the lofty arch, and ascended the velvet-covered throne which had been prepared for her. Her age could not have exceeded twenty-six, though at first sight she appeared older. Her countenance was noble, but severe, its *contour* forming a perfect oval, and the high, smooth brow seemed formed for a diadem. Her features, although strongly marked, were not without a certain charm, albeit that her nether lip protruded in a disagreeable manner; and this, joined to the heaviness of her eyebrows, gave to her whole face a harsh, disdainful air, the effect of which was in no degree lessened either by the dazzling whiteness of her teeth, or the perfect symmetry of her noble form.

Frances Ysam de Grèzes, who on that day became Countess of Roussillon de Biron, by her marriage with young Galliot, was herself the sole heiress of the elder branch of the house of Ysam, whose chief had been a bashaw of three tails in the reign of Bajazet the Second. She brought to her husband a very considerable fortune, together with an unblemished reputation.

As soon as the countess, and all her attendant ladies were duly seated, a boy and girl advanced and sang alternately the stanzas of an epithalamium in the *oc* language, their companions joining in the chorus. When they had finished, they laid at the feet of the bride and bridegroom the offerings brought for the purpose, and anon the cry was again raised of "Health, and prosperity, and length of years to our noble lord and lady!"

The countess then drew from her girdle a purse of red velvet embroidered with gold, and threw its contents amongst the crowd, whereupon the shouts of acclamation burst forth with renewed uproar. Meanwhile, Martial, by his master's order proceeded to impose silence on the people, and forthwith a small, dapper personage clad in a long black robe, and having on his head a cap of the same doleful hue, slowly ascended a neighbouring platform, and having unfolded a roll of parchment given him by the count, he read with pompous emphasis an act whereby "The high and mighty lord, Galliot Vauchac de Biron, by the Grace of God, Count de Roussillon, Lord of Beauzé, and other places, on the occasion of his marriage with the high and gracious lady, Frances Ysam de Grèzes, his well-beloved wife, did exempt his vassals for one year from all debts and services."

Scarcely had the last words been read, when a vociferous shout of joy was heard from every side, and each one was seen trying to make his way near the generous count, so as to kiss, if it were possible, the cloak he wore, and to get a glimpse at his mild features. The transports of his poor people touched Galliot's heart; a luminous ray of pleasure irradiated his usually pensive countenance, and taking the hand of his bride, he raised it to his lips. Just at that moment a tall, thin woman, who had hitherto crouched unnoticed in a corner of the court-yard, stepped directly in front of the count, who, on seeing her, turned deadly pale, and let fall the hand so fondly taken. The woman was not attired like the inhabitants of Quercy, and her garments were gloomy as her aspect. She fixed on Galliot a steadfast look, expressive at once of poignant sorrow and gratified revenge:

"My lord!" said she, "I restore to you your own!"

And the old matron deposited at the bridegroom's feet an osier basket of curious workmanship, containing an infant of exquisite beauty, apparently about eighteen or twenty months old, whose round, soft limbs were scarcely concealed by the thin muslin which was their only covering. A mass of flaxen curls floated around its blooming face, and its eyes were of the deep, clear azure of the heavens. On its naked bosom, suspended from a chain of purest gold, lay a small *reliquaire.* The child stretched out its arms to Frances, who hung over it in violent agitation, and Galliot could no longer restrain his feelings.

"What means this scene, and who is this

child?" demanded the countess, in an imperious tone.

"Madam! you shall soon know all," replied Galliot, in an under tone. Then turning to the old woman with a look of touching entreaty, he said, mildly; "Take away the child—your care is still necessary to it."

"And what of all your fine promises?" she asked, with a bitter laugh.

"I will fulfil them all when the time comes!" returned the young man, in a low tone,—"once more I swear it to you!"

"Get out of the way, old sorceress!" cried the loud voice of the Viscount de Vaillac, the maternal uncle and guardian of Galliot, who was indebted to his negociation for having obtained the hand of the haughty heiress. "I say there!" he went on, "let her be thrown into the vaults, if she refuses to go away quietly."

Suiting the action to the word, he made a sign to Martial to lay hold of the woman, but Galliot interposed with more sternness than he had ever before assumed!

"Let no one dare to lay a hand upon her!" he cried with an air that commanded obedience, and turning again to the haughty woman who stood eyeing with stern defiance those who would have seized her, he said, in almost a whisper, "Gertrude! I charge thee in the name of her whom we both mourn, to put an end to this scene!—To-morrow I will see you again."

Gertrude answered only by a reproachful glance, and taking up the basket, she disappeared with her burden in the crowd.

De Vaillac then approached the bride, and offered his hand to conduct her to the grand hall where the wedding repast was served. At their example, the numerous guests moved on, and took their places around the board, which was loaded with the rarest and most costly viands. Grace was said by the chaplain and the banquet went gaily on. But over the bride and bridegroom hung a thick cloud of sadness that nothing could dispel. Frances was silent and pensive, and Galliot dared not raise his eyes lest they should meet her cold. scrutinizing glance.

Their melancholy was quickly perceived by the company at large, and many a shrewd conjecture was exchanged in low whispers, touching the contents of the mysterious basket, as none of them had been sufficiently near to get even one peep at what it contained. The viscount himself appeared ill at ease; he watched with an anxious eye the embarrassed countenance of Galliot, and not all his efforts to assume gaiety could conceal his dissatisfaction and ill humour.

When the repast was ended he proposed to Madame de Roussillon that they should go to see how the peasants enjoyed their meal, which had been served on tables placed the full length of the court-yard. The company arose on the instant, and the old lord, passing close to his nephew, took occasion to whisper in his ear: "You have made a child of yourself this evening—try now to act and appear more like a man!"

It was a cheering sight to see that numerous assembly bedecked with all manner of rustic finery, and eating away with the keenest relish, in the light of a thousand torches, the juicy meats which were to them so luxurious a feast when compared with the *milas*[3] and the *fars*[4] which formed their staple food. Their joyous gratulations greeted the approach of the count and countess. Galliot, surrounded by his pages and lacqueys seemed to view the scene with lively interest, while the bride was engaged in earnest conversation with her husband's uncle, on whose arm she leaned.

No sooner was the meal concluded than the sound of gay music was heard, giving the signal for the dance, and all were on their feet in a moment. The viscount and the countess, profiting by the confusion which reigned around, withdrew unobserved, and sat down to continue their conversation under the shade of a honeysuckle arbour which then stood at the end of the garden, between the farm-yard and the castle. They had scarce disappeared, when Galliot, calling young Aymar, his foster-brother and the playmate of his childhood, walked rapidly away through the thicket of oaks which extended to the valley. When he had reached the extremity of the table-land or platform, so that the joyous music and the merry voices were softened by distance to a low hum, the young noble suddenly turned, threw himself into the arms of his attendant, and actually burst into tears.

"Courage, my dear lord!" said the page, soothingly, "the Lady Frances loves you, and when you have told her your history, she will be the first to offer pity and consolation."

Here, a louder burst of music was heard—it was the gay *farandole* which the light-hearted villagers were dancing round around the castle.

"To-morrow at the dawn of day," said the young count, hastily, "you will await me with my swiftest courser at the foot of the hill."

"Whither would you go, my lord?" demanded the page with surprize.

"To the hermitage of the Roque-des-Arcs, to speak with dame Gertrude, and consult on the means of acquitting my conscience of its heavy load." Just then a slight noise was heard, as though from the midst of the brush-wood hard by.

"Who can be there at this time?" asked the count in a low voice, and shuddering slightly as he spoke—

"Oh! it is most probably a hare darting through the bushes, my lord," returned Aymar, and without speaking another word the two young men retraced their steps to the castle.

A few hours after, when all within the castle seemed wrapped in sleep, the draw-bridge was lowered by the orders of De Vaillac, giving egress to two men-at-arms who went forth on a secret mission.

On the following morning when, according to the touching practice of the country, the chaplain stood ready at the altar to celebrate the holy sacrifice for all the deceased members of the family, it is said that he had to wait long for the coming of the young count. And when he did at last appear, covered with the dust of the road, he was so ghastly pale that he might well have been taken for one of the spirits for whom they were about to pray. When mass was over, and all strangers had left the chapel, Galliot had a warm and angry altercation with his uncle, and was very soon after seized with a sudden illness, the effect of violent and overwrought feelings. For twenty days, and as many nights did his two faithful friends, the chaplain and Aymar, watch in turn by his bed, for all that time his life was in danger. On the twenty-first day a favourable change took place, but his recovery was slow and lingering. Even when he had recovered his usual health, Galliot remained sad and thoughtful, taking pleasure only in the society of Father Antoine, and in his long and frequent visits to the chapel.

No sooner was he perfectly recovered, than, summoning his dependents, he set out to rejoin Montluc and the army of the Duke d'Enghien. Nine months after, the countess gave birth to a son, who in baptism received his father's name of Galliot, which had been borne by several of his ancestors. Six years had rolled away before the count was permitted to embrace his child, and then he only remained at Roussillon while he recruited his shattered forces, for Henry the Second, who had succeeded Francis the First, just then claimed the aid of his faithful subjects against the Emperor, Charles the Fifth.

CHAPTER I.

FATHER ALPHONSUS.

Twenty-five years had passed away; Count Galliot, the young, the gentle, and the brave, had died gloriously on the battle-field, leaving two children of tender age, who were brought up by Frances with the tenderest care.

Meanwhile the dark curse of Calvinism, which had fallen like a blight on the fair land of France, had been introduced at Montauban, and had thence penetrated even to the quiet vales of Quercy. The most ferocious strife then broke out between those lords who had embraced the new doctrines, and those who refused to give up their time-hallowed faith. The people of Cahors, who were ardently attached to Catholicity, having learned that the innovators were assembling within the city, set fire to the house which served them as a temple. The

Calvinists who escaped that disaster, went to join their brethren of Montauban, who, having driven the Catholics from their city, hastened to extend their operations into the rural districts around.

Under the command of Duras, the chief of their army in Guienne, of Captain Bessonias, and of Souceyrac, a bold and enterprising partizan, they seized Lauzerte, Caylus, and Gourdon, destroying the churches, pillaging the cities, profaning the relics and sacred vessels, and, in fine, making their progress by excesses the most horrible. Fire and pillage were amongst the least odious of their crimes, and their demoniac fury respected neither sex nor age.

Hostilities were for a time suspended by the pacificatory edict of 1563, but the Protestants speedily resumed their arms. The Lord of Assier (Crussol d'Uzès) led into Quercy, in 1567, the Huguenot troops from Dauphiné and Provence, and compelled Montluc to give up that province, where the Catholics then retained only a few strong fortresses. So cruel and vindictive did this war eventually become, that each party was compelled to flee from those cities and towns where it was weakest, and take refuge in those where it was strong; so that every municipality was either exclusively Catholic or exclusively Protestant.

The Countess de Roussillon had remained firm in the faith of her fathers, and seemed in fact to be the more steadily attached thereto in proportion as she saw its divine dogmas opposed and rejected. She was seen to watch with scrutinizing care over the conduct of her vassals, while she herself became most assiduous in the performance of many devotional exercises which hitherto she had been wont to neglect. Not content with praying in her oratory, and in the chapel, she began to make long pilgrimages on foot, and to mortify her body by the most severe privations. And yet peace seemed a stranger to her soul; for there dwelt within its depths some darkly-troubled spirit—remorse it might have been—which shut out all celestial consolation. Yet outwardly nothing could be more irreproachable than the life of the countess. Since the death of Galliot she had lived in perfect seclusion, occupied solely with the education of her children and the management of her affairs, all of which duties she fulfilled ably and to the letter.

Two sentiments there were which overruled all others in her soul, and these were the very lawful desire of seeing the success of the Catholic cause, and a fondness for her children which amounted to passion. But, alas! her gloomy and imperious mind threw its dark shade on all her best and most praiseworthy feelings. So it was that the effect of her ill-directed maternal love was an overweening thirst for the grandeur and prosperity of the noble house of Roussillon, of which her son was now the head, and accordingly for him she never scrupled to avow the most decided preference, chiefly because he was Count de Roussillon, and all the rest. On the other hand, her religious zeal, pushed to the extreme of bigotry, made her hate all who differed from her in faith, and made her, moreover, unmercifully severe on even the slightest backsliding of others, as though that religion which she so ostentatiously professed was not a religion of indulgence and of love!

One day the Countess de Roussillon, still in deep mourning, was seated on a sofa, counting over on her fingers the beads of a coral rosary which had been blessed on the tomb of Our Lord Jesus Christ. She was then about fifty-one years of age, and her face bore the impress of many a sorrow, for the eyes were deeply sunk in their sockets, and their former dazzling lustre was dimmed by the frequent tear; it was easy to see, too, that her health was but indifferent, from the ashy and uniform paleness of her countenance. Yet the majesty of her mien and the still noble expression of her faded features commanded even then a feeling deeper than respect, and almost amounting to awe.

In the deep embrasure of a window sat a young girl of seventeen or thereabouts, working away with cheerful assiduity at a piece of coarse linen. She was clad in a simple white robe without trimming or ornament of any kind. Her slight and flexible figure still retained much of the careless grace of childhood, and her face, with its almost imperceptible colouring, was chiefly remarkable for its enchanting sweetness and modesty, while her fair tresses, kept back from her forehead by a narrow band of velvet, fell over her neck and shoulders in many a silken curl. From time to time she raised her deep blue eyes to her mother, as though awaiting the proper moment to address her. At length Madame de Roussillon made the sign of the cross and put her beads in her pocket.

"Mother!" exclaimed the young girl in an insinuating tone, "I am about to ask a favour of you."

"Of what nature, Esperie?" demanded the countess. Esperie started up, ran to her mother, and knelt before her.

"Well, my child, what is it?" said the mother, bending down to kiss the fair brow of her daughter, who seemed trembling with emotion.

Esperie, a good deal encouraged by this unusual mark of tenderness, spoke out with somewhat more confidence: "I entreat you, my dearest mother! to take Mathurin back again into your service!"

"What! Mathurin Renac?" cried the countess, angrily. "The wretch whom I expelled from my domains because I found him infected to the heart's core?—Truly, I would rather throw open my sheep-folds to the devouring wolves, or my castle to those infected with leprosy, for neither would be so dangerous as this heretic!—How dare you speak to me of such people, Mademoiselle?"

"My dear mother," said Esperie, scarcely able to restrain her tears—"Poor Mathurin is no longer a heretic. Will you deign to hear all that I know concerning him?"

"Yes—proceed!" said her mother, coldly.

"Well! when you had driven him so ignominiously from the castle, the poor fellow . . . . ."

"Pray reserve your pity for those who deserve it!" interrupted the countess.

"Deserving or not, was he not to be pitied when torn from his mother?" Frances was touched by the deep tenderness with which these words were spoken, and their sweet meaning reached her heart. "Go on, my child!" she said much more mildly than before.

"Well, then, he reached La Roque on the very day when several Catholic families flying from the persecution which awaited them at home, came to seek an asylum in that village. These poor people were assembled in the streets, relating the dreadful cruelties practised by the Huguenots in Gourdon and other places, while the people of La Roque listened to the recital with silent indignation, when Mathurin passed directly before the church without taking off his hat.

"There goes one of them!" cried out an old woman—"as I'm a living woman, that's a heretic!" In an instant five or six men rushed on Mathurin and would doubtless have killed him on the spot, had not the new priest of La Roque (of whose extraordinary zeal and piety we have heard so much) hastened to his assistance. No sooner had he perceived what was passing, than he threw himself, at the risk of his own life, in the midst of the furious assailants, and by prayers and exhortations at length succeeded in making them give up their dread purpose.

"What! and did he do all that for a heretic?" demanded the countess in unfeigned astonishment.

"But that is not all, mamma!" went on Esperie, "for as poor Mathurin lay on the ground covered with blood and almost lifeless, the priest took him on his back and carried him to the presbytery, where, having washed and dressed his wounds, he took care of him for no less than two months, that he continued ill. Mathurin, full of gratitude for the 'good Samaritan,' acknowledged to him that he had been seduced by the Huguenots; he besought him for an explanation of the doctrine of our holy religion, with which he had been but imperfectly acquainted, and quickly perceiving that Calvinism is but a severed and withered branch of that eternal church which is to extend over all the earth, as Father Alphonsus said, he willingly renounced his errors. And now as his aged mother continues to inhabit the farm whereon she was born, Mathurin, who has but her in the world, implores your ladyship's permission to return!"

"If it be as you tell me," said the countess, after a short pause, "Mathurin may return to his mother."

"And his situation as messenger, which is still vacant—will you not restore him to that also?" said Esperie in her sweetest voice, "for my dear mamma knows that Mathurin's mother is very, very old, and he will require some means of supporting her, as she cannot work for herself?"

"Every fault deserves its chastisement," returned the countess, with a gloomy air, "and it is better to do penance in this world than in the other!"

"Well, but dear mamma! do you reckon as nothing his having been so roughly handled—nay, almost killed and being very ill for two whole months?—Moreover, as the good God has already pardoned him, will you be more severe than He?"

Frances frowned. "Methinks you grow over forward for a girl of your age," said she, "Rise and return to your work—you shall know my decision at another time."

" God will assist me in my suit," said Esperie to herself, as she resumed her place near the window; and she took up her work with the consoling reflection that her aged *protegée* would at least have plenty of linen, for it was for the poor old mother of Mathurin that the young Lady de Roussillon was so eagerly working. What secret link was it that united these two females, of whom one was poor and helpless, and verging on the grave, whilst the other was but entering the world, surrounded by the halo of grace and beauty, and reared in the lap of luxury and splendour? That mysterious tie was religion which embraces within her universal heart the entire human family!—it was that tender and fertile charity which filling the heart of that young girl, made her adopt as her own the interests of all who were unhappy or unfortunate. That title alone sufficed to excite the sympathy of Mademoiselle de Roussillon, whose entire life was but one continued course of devotion and good works. When little more than a child, she knew no other pleasure than that of doing good, nor ever dreamed of another; the watchful protectress of her mother's vassals, she softened by her kindness and her benefits the effects of the inexorable severity of the countess. Simple and guileless as a merry child, her presence shed a bright ray of joy over the gloomy mansion; her trifling faults were cheerfully overlooked in consideration of her many engaging qualities, for in truth, the very greatest of her failings or foibles, was but some one of her virtues carried to excess.

"This priest of La Roque is a most extraordinary man," observed the countess, after a momentary silence, "is he not the same who threw himself into the Lot in the month of January to save the child of a poor beggar which had disappeared under the ice?"

"The very same, mamma! and it was he, too, who saved from the flames that good old Richard, who was condemned to be burned as a sorcerer. It is said that he defended him against twelve stout peasants—Oh yes, truly, he is a man of dauntless bravery!"

"What is his name?" demanded the countess.

"He is called Father Alphonsus, mamma, and that is all I know about him."

"Yes, so it is," said Frances, as if communing with herself," a man without a name, and of obscure birth—I must then forgive him . . . ."

In order to understand these half-uttered words, our readers must know that La Roque-des-Arcs is only about a league and a half from the Castle de Roussillon; and though that village was not on the domains of the count, still its chief personages were always in the habit of paying homage at stated times to the lords of Roussillon. The new priest alone had never complied with this custom, although he had been in the neighbourhood better than eight months, and the pride of the countess was secretly wounded by what she deemed his neglect.

"Forgive him what?" inquired Esperie, quickly, for, being herself a stranger to this overweening pride of rank, and not being able to understand the character of the countess, she was utterly in the dark as to the meaning of the words she had just heard.

Her thoughtless question would inevitably have drawn forth a severe reproof, for Madame de Roussillon, though she tenderly loved her daughter, made it a point to keep her at a respectful distance, which she deemed necessary to maintain her own dignity; but just at that moment an unexpected incident gave a turn to the conversation.

The personage who now presented himself to the ladies was an old man of at least, sixty; fat and chubby, with a bald head, a shining red face, and a nose thickly covered with carbuncles; his thin legs seeming to totter beneath the burden of an enormous paunch which projected at least half a foot over the adjacent portions of his body. It is no easy matter to recognise in this portrait, Martial, the major-domo, whom we have seen so active on the day of his lord's marriage. He just opened the door, and said, respectfully, without advancing farther into the hall :—

" The priest of La Roque wishes to have the honour of speaking with her ladyship the countess ;—will she deign to receive him ? "

Frances gave an involuntary start, which seemed to say, "At length he is come!" and Esperie clasped her small hands together with a joyous air. In her solitary life, the smallest thing diverging from the usual daily routine was something worth noting, and, moreover, all that she knew of this clergyman tended to raise to the highest pitch, both her veneration and her curiosity.

"Let the priest of La Roque enter!" said the countess, haughtily, seating herself once more with queenly dignity. "Esperie, come and sit by me!"

The light-hearted girl pushed over her seat, and then skipping after it, she sat down beside her mother.

"What mean all those silly tricks?" said the countess, "will you never settle down into that quiet and grave dignity, which a girl of your rank ought to have?"

"The priest of La Roque!" was here announced by Martial.

Esperie's curiosity was proof against all the dignified lectures of her mother, and she instantly raised her head to examine the visitor, who saluted the countess with modest dignity. There was nothing in the appearance of Father Alphonsus which bore any resemblance to the idea which both ladies had formed of him. His figure, rather below the middle size, was far from denoting that robust strength which they had believed him to possess, while, the delicacy of his features and their intellectual expression, together with a certain air of distinction which not even the humility of the devoted Christian could entirely conceal, were strangely opposed to the supposed meanness of his origin.

"Sir," said the countess, with a sort of haughty condescension, "I am both surprised and pleased by this visit. The truth is, that I am the more disposed to value it highly, as I had scarcely expected such an honour!"

"Madam," returned the priest in a deep, rich voice, which trembled somewhat as he proceeded, "the labours of our ministry leave us priests but little time for ceremonious visits."

"Yet your predecessors must have had more time on their hands," retorted Frances in that haughty and slightly sarcastic tone which was so familiar to her; "for I had the pleasure of often seeing them here."

"When I can be in my way useful at the castle, Madam, you will ever find me, as they were, entirely at your disposal," and the priest, as he spoke, appeared to take no notice of the reproach implied in the words of the countess.

"I thank you, reverend father," said the latter, "since the death of Father Anthony, my chaplain, whom I have not as yet been able to replace, (all ranks of the clergy being so wofully thinned by the persecution of the Huguenots) Father Joseph has been so good as to come daily from his convent to say mass for us. He has recently given their first communion to all the children of my domains who had reached the age of ten years. We live in times, sir, when we cannot too soon enrich the minds of the young with the blessings of religious instruction, for the time is come when all who possess the germ of faith are called upon to make it bear fruit."

"Yes, and above all other fruits, that of charity, without which faith is dead;" said the priest, "and I am come, Madam! to you on an errand of mercy, hoping that it lives and flourishes in your soul."

"Explain yourself, sir!" said the countess coldly.

"That will I in few words. The favour which I seek at your hands, is forgiveness for a poor man who has long served you faithfully, and whose warmest wish is to do so again."

"Is it of Mathurin you speak, father?" demanded the lady—"why, it is only a little while ago that my daughter made a similar application for him!"

"And does Mademoiselle de Roussillon deign to interest herself for this poor man?" inquired the priest with surprise, and for the first time he turned on Esperié his mild, yet penetrating eye, "if so, the cause must be gained!" And after a moment's pause he went on. "May Heaven reward you; young daughter of a noble house! for your compassionating the woes of the poor!—May the God who loveth mercy, requite you an hundred-fold!"

"Amen!" added the countess, entirely subdued by the touching warmth of the prayer, offered up as it was for her own beloved child. " But what noise do I hear in the court?—Hark! is it not the sound of a horse's feet, and—yes! it is—my son's voice!"

"Yes it is—it is my brother!" exclaimed Esperie, as she flew towards the door with the lightness and grace of the wild gazelle. The priest looked after her with benevolent interest.

At this moment a tall young man appeared on the threshold, booted and spurred, and covered with dust and perspiration. His whole air and bearing were high and haughty, yet the expression of his features was far from being noble or even good.

"Great news!" he cried, repulsing the offered caress of Esperie, and advancing towards the countess, whose hand he kissed with an air of deep respect; "Great and glad news, my mother!"

"In the first place sit down and rest you a moment, for I see you are almost exhausted," said the countess, as she tenderly wiped the heated face of her son.

"You know I told you," said the young man, in a tone of full importance, "that the recent indulgence of the court was meant to cover some great project. The queen knew too well that the Huguenots were preparing for a decisive stroke, and that if they became the strongest, the life of the king and those of all the royal family would be the sacrifice, so that a fearful volcano was at that very moment raging beneath, which might at any moment shower forth the elements of destruction. Her subtle spirit penetrated the designs of the heretics!—and thwarted them ere yet they had been tried, so that now we have got rid of them, for some time to come, I promise you."

"But what has happened," exclaimed the countess, "to bring about so fortunate a result?"

"Just let me tell you the whole affair as I heard it this morning at Cahors," said the young man, leaning back in his seat. "You know that the Admiral Coligny, having been wounded by an assassin, his brother Huguenots loudly asserted that the author of the attempt was none other than the Duke of Guise. The Calvinists, assembled in Paris to the number of eight thousand, broke out into fearful threats of vengeance, openly avowing that they were strong enough to take justice into their own hands, in case the king refused to avenge their wrong. The boldest amongst them publicly threatened to assassinate the Duke and the queen-mother herself. Catharine, in a panic, quickly re-assembled the council, gave the king to understand that it was better to get rid of the Huguenots at once, than to have them ever holding out the most terrible menaces over the heads of the royal family, and without waiting for the usual forms of justice against public criminals, she had them condemned to death without any sort of trial. The massacre was fixed for the following night, the eve of St. Bartholomew, and the Duke of Guise was charged with its execution. Every thing succeeded as she could have wished, Coligny being stabbed in his chamber and thrown dead into the street.——"

"What a horrible butchery!" cried Esperie, interrupting her brother, and hiding her face with her hands.

"The alarm was rung in every direction," resumed Galliot, without noticing his sister's emotion,—"the soldiers and the people, who awaited but the signal, rushed at once through every locality in Paris. They broke into the houses of the Calvinists, and dispatched all the inmates—nay, the Louvre itself afforded no shelter, for the Huguenot lords who fled there for refuge were pursued, and slaughtered in the halls and galleries, and chambers—and the king of Navarre himself only escaped by abjuring his errors."

"What then," exclaimed the countess, who had listened to the horrifying recital thus far with a stupified air, "What then, has the king of Navarre recanted his errors?"

"My God! my God! the wickedness of men!" cried Esperie, all in tears.

"How, sister! you weep for the triumph of the good cause?" said her brother, with rising anger.

"I weep for the untimely end of so many wretched victims" returned the tender-hearted girl almost indignantly, "and still more do I deplore such a crime committed by those who call themselves Catholics!"

"Go take your distaff," said Galliot, disdainfully, "Politics are far beyond your comprehension!"

"It is true, my daughter," said the countess with melancholy gravity, "that you are too young to judge of the actions of princes. And yet," she continued, turning to her son, "this event does not seem to me so likely to crush the Huguenots as you seem to think it. When the tiger is wounded, does he not become still more dreadful in his fury? What is your opinion of all this, reverend father?"

The priest started like one suddenly aroused from profound meditation. Since the arrival of the young count, he had not joined in the conversation, and sat with his eyes fixed on the portrait of Galliot the Fourth, where it hung above the seat of the countess;

Here Galliot the Fifth exclaimed in a decided tone: "Why of course, the good father must think as I do!—Compose yourself, mother, for the monster is not only wounded but he is truly dying. In all the cities of France, the Catholics, authorized by the king's order, and nerved by the sight of their ruined churches and the memory of their slaughtered priests, have taken it upon themselves to administer justice, and to revenge so many brutal murders and fearful sacrileges. Every where they have made short work of these impious wretches, so that their party will not for a long time be able to raise its head."

"God grant that it be so!" sighed the countess.

"May the God of mercy have pity on us all!" suddenly exclaimed the priest. This revolting account had already reached my ears, and with all good and pious Catholics, I had mourned for the crime perpetrated by our rulers. Is it possible, oh God of love and of peace!" he cried with rising enthusiasm, "that men created to thy likeness, and redeemed by the blood of thy Son, can destroy each other in thy name?—And thou, oh divine Jesus! whose sublime law reduces itself to these two commandments—"Love God above all things, and thy neighbour as thyself!"—thou, who willest not the death of the sinner, but his conversion—thou who brought back the lost sheep on thy shoulders, so as to spare him the fatigue of the journey—how hast thou regarded these inhuman crimes?—Save us, oh my God! from the terrible chastisement which these public atrocities have merited!—pardon at once the executioners and the victims!"

"You astonish me, sir!" interrupted Galliot, with his usual supercilious tone, preserving nevertheless that respectful air with which he had from earliest infancy been taught to address a priest. "You cannot but know that in all our civil wars, the Protestants have invariably been the aggressors, and that their outrages have gone beyond all bounds!—Not to multiply examples, you have not, I am sure, forgotten their atrocious doings here in our poor Quercy: the cities of Lauzerte, of Caylus, and so many others ruthlessly sacked and plundered; that of Caussade all but destroyed, the priests of God being there flung from the height of the towers;—at Gourdon, the friars' chapel burned to ashes and themselves cruelly massacred; the sacred vessels of the church of Racamadour melted and coined into money; the Catholics of Montauban oppressed, publicly scourged in the streets—virgins consecrated to God, driven forth from the monasteries and left only to choose between apostacy and the worst that a virtuous woman can dread?—Keeping all these abominable outrages in view, can you indeed look upon the massacre of St. Bartholomew as aught else than a well-merited retribution?"

"Yet, oh God!" exclaimed the priest with fervour, "are we then no more the disciples of that Jesus who died on the cross praying for his executioners?—Young man, you have the happiness of being a Catholic, and yet you talk of revenge!—or can you imagine that fire and sword will bring back into the pale of the church our brethren who have wandered away into error? No—no—do not thus deceive yourself—these cruel retaliations will call forth others, for blood will have blood!"

"Alas! I fear it is but too true!" said the countess in an under tone.

"Wo to us!—treble wo!" resumed the priest with increased enthusiasm, "the hydra-monster, heresy, arises in his might—he rushes upon us with vengeful ferocity, and blood—the blood of our people—streams forth on every side—alas! how many a gallant soldier—how many a mighty lord will be sacrificed to his fury!—Pale and motionless, I can already see them—these stout champions of our holy faith—as they lie there in death. The wailing of sorrow seems to fill mine ears, it is '*Rachel mourning for her children, and will not be comforted because they are not*'——"

Esperie regarded the inspired speaker with a wild astonishment bordering on terror. The countess was pale and trembling, and Galliot alone preserved his usual self-possession.

"My very good father!" he said, playing negligently with the cross-hilt of his sword, "I would thank you to keep to yourself your lugubrious prognostications. My life for it, were the Calvinists to take it into their cursed heads to have a St. Bartholomew of their own—nay, were they only to make the slightest attempt at such a thing, by the holy mass! they would pay dearly for their impudence!—Just let our precious cousins of Gourdon and De Vaillac, who are at the head of all their goings on, come here some fine day to pay us a visit in this our Castle of Roussillon, and they shall see what will follow!—They shall find, to their cost, that I and my men-at-arms are none of us monks whom they can slaughter like sheep!"

"Cease this talking for the present, my son," said the countess, "and let us beg of God that he may avert from us this fearful judgment!"

"Courage, mother," returned the count, "I swear to you that we have nothing to fear from these hell-hounds, let the priest say what he will. They have got a lesson that will serve them for some time. Besides, you must remember, that the massacre of St. Bartholomew did not extend into our province."

"It is true," said the priest, in his full, sonorous voice, "and this blessing we must attribute solely to that excessive intolerance which marks the heretics of our poor Quercy. Thus it happened that all our cities being either entirely Catholic or entirely Protestant, the orders of the court could not be executed here. One thing may be truly said, to the honour of humanity, and that is, that all true Catholics deplore this lamentable occurrence. Yes, the tragedy of St. Bartholomew has called forth tears in the very Court of Medecis, and many a hapless victim has been saved from the fury of the murderers by Catholics—truly worthy of the name. At Lisieux, the Calvinists found an asylum in the episcopal palace, where the worthy bishop, Jean Hemmyer, successfully defended them against their furious assailants. The Archbishop of Lyons was not so fortunate, for the blood-thirsty populace having broken into the palace, not all the efforts of the united clergy could save the unhappy Huguenots who had taken refuge there; nevertheless, these good pastors have the consolation of knowing that they did their duty, and did all they could to save the wretched victims. Some governors there are, too, who had the virtuous courage to resist the orders of the court, and it is said that the governor of Bayonne, the Viscount d'Othez, wrote as follows to the king:

"Sire,—I have communicated your Majesty's letter to the inhabitants, and to the soldiers of the garrison; I have found them all good and loyal subjects and brave soldiers, but not one amongst them would consent to become an executioner."

May these examples serve as a lesson for all men—and may the prayers and good works of all pious Catholics turn away from us the uplifted arm of divine wrath!"

"We shall pray, father!" said Esperie, raising to heaven her humid eyes.

"And you will prevail upon your noble mother, Mademoiselle, to pardon that poor Mathurin—that deed of mercy will bring you happiness."

"Mathurin may return when he will," said the countess, "I freely restore him to his former situation, and to my entire confidence."

"And I will venture to assure your ladyship that you will never have cause to repent of having done so," returned the priest, cheerfully. "Suffer me to thank you, Madam, on behalf of this young man, and you also, Mademoiselle. May Heaven bless and protect you!" he added in a voice quivering with emotion, and instantly rising, he saluted the countess with much respect, and quitted the room.

CHAPTER II.

THE DREAM.

From that day forward Madame de Roussillon became more anxious than ever. As to the young count, being confident in the sure and quick destruction of the Protestant party, he grew louder and louder in his boasting, and gave himself up with all the ardour of youth to his favourite amusement, the chase. Meanwhile the foresight of the priest was all too soon found to be correct. The Huguenots, although at first, stunned and intimidated, speedily arose more terrible than ever. Those of Quercy had escaped the massacre, and burning to avenge their brethren, they took up arms and came forth in all their strength,—took Bieule, Souillac, and Capdenac, carrying death and destruction wherever they penetrated. Then it was that Montluc, governor of Guienne, made an appeal to the Catholic nobles, beseeching them to join him in defence of the faith.

Young Galliot, it is true, was rather given to idle boasting, and inconsiderate he was beyond all doubt, yet courage was hereditary in his family, and he never shrank from danger. No sooner then had the invitation reached him, than collecting all those of his vassals who were able to bear arms, he forthwith prepared to set out.

However poignant was the grief of his mother's heart on hearing this sad news, yet she never once thought of opposing her son's design. If the nobles then enjoyed many and high privileges they had also many and great duties to fulfil, and they were never chary of their blood when called on to defend their king, their religion, or their country. Nor was this the first time that the brave young count had been called away from his home to do battle against the Huguenots. Young as he was, he had been twice before called on to display his courage, and two scars still remained—one on his left cheek and the other on his chest—to prove that he quailed not before the foe. But this dauntless bravery was not Galliot's sole good quality, for he inherited much if not all of his mother's strength of mind; and if he had all the presumption of the Gascon character, he had not a particle of the sordid parsimony which is also a distinguishing characteristic of that province; and though his contemptuous and haughty bearing, was but too apt to make him enemies amongst those of his own rank, yet his liberality rendered him dear to those whom he commanded.

When the day of departure was at length arrived, the young count, with all his men-at-arms heard mass in the chapel of the castle. High martial fire shone in his dark eyes, and the consciousness of being engaged in a noble cause, lent a corresponding dignity to his usually uninteresting countenance. Esperie, knelt beside her mother in earnest prayer; while the countess, on the contrary, affected a look of cold indifference—but, alas! the mortal paleness of her face and the convulsive tremor of her livid lips, gave melancholy proof of the heart-rending sorrow which she thus sternly repressed.

When the holy sacrifice was finished, and Father Joseph had blessed the banner which Esperie had embroidered for her brother, all strangers quitted the chapel. Galliot then ascended the tribune where his mother sat, bent one knee before her, and besought her blessing at that solemn moment. The countess could no longer restrain her emotion, and she threw herself all in tears, into the arms of her son. The more violently she had kept in her grief, it now burst forth with so much the greater impetuosity—her tears fell in torrents, and the deep sobs of anguish burst forth as from a breaking heart; the haughty countess was subdued for the moment into the fond mother about to be deprived of her only son.

Never before had Galliot received from his mother any such proofs of affection, and he was at once surprised and agitated by a weakness so foreign to her character.

"Wherefore these wild transports, Madam?" he asked in a voice perhaps a little severe, yet still with an affectionate air, "surely this is not the first time that I have risked my life on the battle-field?—Either you must take me for an inexperienced boy, or as being sadly deficient in courage! Last year you seemed to have greater confidence when I was leaving you, and I am not aware that the event betrayed that confidence. Do you forget that I, with my own troop alone, defeated Bessonais himself with a force three times as numerous, and yet escaped with a slight scratch or two?"

"Alas! I do not doubt your courage, my son," said Frances, with a choaking voice, "but your father too, was brave—oh! how brave—and yet he was but little older than you are now, when he lost his life on a bloody field!"

"And have you not told me, Madam, from my childhood up, that such a death was glorious before God and man?"

"And I told you truly, my dear son, for so it is," said the countess after a moment's silence—driving back into her heart by an effort of her strong will the violent sorrow which had so unnerved her, and resuming much of her usual dignity, "forget, then, this momentary weakness, and remember only the advice of your mother, for that will ever guide you in the path of honour!"

"I am convinced of it, Madam!" said Galliot as he reverently kissed his mother's hand, "and, for the rest, I entreat you to have no fears on my account—those with whom I have to deal know me too well to await my charge—they are so cowardly that I would not fear to attack them one to ten. Duras himself, with all his band, would not stand a quarter of an hour before my gallant soldiers."

"Oh! speak not thus, Galliot," said the countess, who, with all her maternal tenderness, was fully alive to the excessive presumption of her son. "Speak not thus, I implore you, for alas! the Huguenot party contains but too many knights of undoubted courage. Duras is a limb of Satan, an infamous apostate, but he is, nevertheless, a valiant champion, and our uncle of Vaillac, another of their leaders, is as brave as mortal man could be. Be then, on your guard my son: unite prudence and discretion to your intrepidity, for courage alone does not constitute a great man—many other virtues must be his who wins that title. Be, therefore, merciful and humane, without weakness; generous without prodigality; and brave without temerity—remember what your ancestors have been and study to walk in their glorious footsteps. Neither must you forget that it is for our holy religion you are now to combat, and prove yourself a soldier worthy of such a cause: avoid the ordinary licentiousness of camps, and labour to subdue your evil passions, for it is easier to do that than to satisfy them. And now, my beloved son, my hope, my life, my all, may the Almighty God bless you even as I do!"

"I thank you, dearest mother!" said Galliot slowly, and with emotion.

Just then Esperie entered, and the count embraced her with more tenderness than he had ever before displayed, then turning again towards his mother who sat motionless as the statue of despair, he once more pressed her to his heart, and hastily descended to the court.

"Is all ready?" he called out to his troop, as he threw himself on a beautiful brown bay charger, which had been snorting and prancing with impatience.

"All—all!" was the ready answer—"We are all ready and willing to die for our holy faith, and for our valorous lord, Galliot the Fifth!"

"Forward then, my lads! in God's name!—And now for the enemies of church and king!"

The cheering sound of many a horn filled the air, as the gallant band darted forward over the esplanade with Galliot at their head. Their arms of polished steel glittered brightly in the light of the rising sun: the spotless white banner, emblazoned with the arms of the Counts of Roussillon, a golden lion on an azure field, floated proudly on the air, its folds agitated by the gentle breeze of the morning, while the fiery steeds flew over the ground, throwing up at every step a vast cloud of dust. Anon the troop disappeared around the side of the mountain, and quickly appeared again in good order on the road which then wound around the brow of the mountain, and led from Roussillon to Cahors.

The countess took her station on the donjon-tower, and followed with her tearful gaze the lofty form of Galliot, who towered above his men-at-arms like some overtopping oak, nor withdrew her eyes while she could catch a glimpse of the band through the intervening foilage. But when the warlike array had faded into a dim black speck on the far horizon, when even the snow-white plume of her son's helmet was no more seen waving in the breeze, Frances fell on her knees, and cried :—

"My God! my God! have pity on me!"

At that moment Esperie ran towards her mother, having learned that she had ascended the keep. On her appearance, Madame de Roussillon arose from her knees, though her face was still wet with the recent tears; sternly repressing the bursting sigh which trembled on her lips, she at once resumed her cold, proud look.

"Go down," said she, "and call Jeanneton, as I propose visiting your garden which I have not seen for a long time. After that you will take some assistance from me to poor Catisson who is blind, and whose eldest son has followed your brother to the war."

The fair girl was pleased at the prospect of doing good to some one, and a sweet smile lit up all her face as she hastened to summon the attendant. She then returned and offered her arm to her mother.

"Why, your flowers are magnificent, my child!" said the countess, kindly, when they had gone a little way through the garden.

The happy girl flew off to gather a bunch of white roses, which she then presented to her mother, but the latter declined the offering.

"Nay, keep for yourself those spotless roses, for they are the emblems of innocence," said she with some emotion, "and give me a scabioza, the mournful symbol of widowhood—it is the only flower which accords with me, for it is gloomy as my soul!"

Esperie obeyed with a heavy sigh, for these words of her mother had saddened her heart; that heart so changeful in its emotions, and so quick to sympathize with the feelings of those she loved. The countess took the scabioza and kissed her daughter's forehead, then placing a piece of gold in her hand she said:

"Go now, my child, and charge Catisson to remember your brother in her prayers—I shall await you here."

Esperie, followed by Jeanneton, sprang away like a bird on her errand of mercy, and for a moment her mother forgot her sorrows as she gazed after her pure and beautiful child. For a little while she walked to and fro, her mind much calmer and more resigned, for the good deed she had just done had opened her soul to holy and peaceful thoughts. But soon after, feeling somewhat fatigued, she seated herself by chance in that same honeysuckle-arbour where five and twenty years before she had sat and conversed with the Viscount de Vaillac on the evening of her wedding-day. Whether it was that the subsequent apostacy of that nobleman now affected her more than it was wont, or that the memory of what had passed on the occasion in question awoke a keen and stinging sense of remorse, but it is certain that her face suddenly assumed a look of anguish and affright, and a few scalding tears forced their way to her eyes. Quickly she arose from her seat, and returned to the castle.

Esperie on her return vainly sought her mother in the garden. Not an arbour did she leave unvisited, but her mother was not there, and the anxious girl hastened to seek her within the castle. There, too, she was unsuccessful in seeing her, for the countess had locked herself in her own apartment, whence she did not appear till the hour of dinner. The meal, as may well be imagined, was a sad and silent one, for a vacant seat was there, and who could tell when he who should have occupied it would return, if he ever did.

When the night was come, the faithful Martial, followed by four men-at-arms, made the interior round of the castle, raised the drawbridge, placed the warder on the grand tower, and having trebly barred the immense oaken gates, thickly studded and plated with iron, he presented the keys to Madame de Roussillon on a silver gilt fan reserved for that purpose. Then a young lad, whose office it was, ascended the belfry, and rang the bell, whereupon all the inmates of the castle, including the garrison took their way to the chapel. The altar of the blessed virgin was gaily bedecked with Esperie's white roses, and the air was richly laden with their fragrant perfume; several wax tapers shed their soft light around. The countess and her daughter took their places in the small gallery, and in the absence of the chaplain, Mademoiselle de Roussillon read aloud the evening prayers. Her eyes were raised to heaven as she proceeded, and her soft, harmonious accents seemed like some heavenly music amid the deep silence around. Her face bore the impress of wrapt devotion, as her whole air and appearance made a living type of candour and innocence, so that when in conclusion she fervently exclaimed: "Remember, oh my God! all those who go up to battle for thy holy church, and do Thou preserve and shield them from every danger!" there was not one in the chapel who was not moved even to tears, for scarcely one was there who had not seen in the morning a friend or comrade set out for certain danger.

Two hours after no soul was stirring in the castle save two—the warder who paced his weary way on the summit of the keep, and the countess who prayed and groaned at the foot of the altar. Even those who best knew that proud and imperious woman, could scarce have recognized her by the light of the small silver lamp which ever burned in the sanctuary, as she lay humbly prostrate on the cold flagstones beneath which lay the dead Lords of Roussillon. Ghastly pale she was, and clothed in her long white nightgown, her shoulders half covered by her rich tresses, she looked like a disembodied spirit, and it was pitiful to hear the cries of her grief, now that she could mourn unobserved and unheard by mortal.

"My God! my God! dispel from my poor, harrassed soul, these frightful presentiments!" she cried in anguish, "withdraw from mine eyes that bleeding figure which haunts me even in sleep!—Avenging God! have not sixteen years of severe penance sufficed to appease thy wrath?—Is my crime indeed so great that it exceeds in magnitude even thy boundless mercy?—Have I not wept and groaned before thee in bitter repentance?—Have I not richly endowed churches and monasteries?—And now if these things can move thee to pity, oh righteous God! I here solemnly promise that if thou wilt but preserve my son's life, I will rebuild, as speedily as may be, the convent of Saint Ursula, burned last year by the Huguenots."

And then she launched out into an enumeration of the magnificent treasures wherewith she proposed to endow the holy place, forgetting, poor woman! that the offering most acceptable to God is that of an humble and contrite heart, It must indeed be owned that, if Frances so long applied herself by austere penance and by munificent donations, to silence the cries of a remorseful conscience, it was but the punishment of her sin which affrighted her; never yet had the tears of genuine compunction bathed her soul, nor the flame of divine charity entered therein to purify it, and so it was that the prayers which so often burst from her lips, gave but small relief to that miserable soul. Nevertheless, this new project had the power of diverting her from her gloomy meditations, and sitting down on the steps of the altar she began to reflect on the means of putting it into execution.

The midnight hour rang out from the great clock. The cries of the birds of night alone broke on the dead stillness, and the countess, overpowered with fatigue and long watching, dropt asleep where she sat. While she slept a fearful dream passed before her; it seemed that the vault beneath her feet suddenly opened and the shade of her husband appeared in a menacing attitude, reproaching her with her crime. She would have fled, but a superhuman power chained her to the spot; she opened her mouth to justify herself, but her tongue clave to the palate, and she could not utter a word.

All at once the scene changed—the spectre sank again into the yawning tomb, and there arose in his place a gigantic funeral pile on which was heaped a prodigious number of coffins, the whole being surrounded by an immense number of large wax tapers, and yet the light seemed but dull and flickering. The chapel appeared to be hung with black—a young priest, whom the countess recognized as the priest of La Roque celebrated the holy sacrifice, and the service for the dead was chanted by twelve Dominican friars.

A tall, thin woman who stood at the foot of the bier, then made a sign for Madame de Roussillon to approach, and while a fierce exultation shot forth from her hollow eyes, she pointed to the longest of the coffins, while the young priest was heard to cry aloud:—

"The voice of lamentation is heard in Rama—it is Rachel mourning for her children, and will not be comforted, because they are not!"

At the same moment the large coffin seemed to open of itself, and disclosed to the straining eyes of Frances the dead body of her son. A piercing cry escaped her lips, and the cry and the shock awoke her from her fearful slumber.

The countess was somewhat relieved when she found that all was but the phantom of her over-excited imagination; but still a dreadful idea took possession of her soul—"if that dream were a warning from above!" she shudderingly exclaimed, and rendered superstitious by the very excess of her maternal love, she suffered when awake all the torments of her terrific vision; a cold dew started on her forehead—an excruciating pain contracted every limb, and she expected every moment to see the threatening ghost of Count Galliot arise before her as she had seen it in her sleep.

Falling again on her knees on the damp stone, the wretched woman exclaimed, while the burning tears chased each other over her livid cheek: "Oh God! my God! have mercy on my son!—if Thou must have a victim—strike me—here I am!—but oh! turn away from my son the blow which hangs over him, and if his days be indeed numbered cut off the remainder of my life to add to his. Thou knowest, oh Lord! that he is the sole hope of an illustrious house; protect him then, oh God of mercy!"

Thus, by a silly concatenation of ideas, but one common enough at that period, maternal tenderness and pride of birth and rank, blended together in the heart of the countess. Long did she remain prostrate in the sanctuary; then she went up once more into the gallery, but could not bring herself to go alone through the long, dark passage which led to her apartments, so shaken and unnerved was her usually strong mind, by the horrors of that fearful night.

At length the first streaks of the dawn penetrated the richly-stained windows; soon after a light step was heard in the sacristy, the door which led thence was softly opened, and Mademoiselle de Roussillon advanced with an air of profound veneration to the altar of the virgin. From her position in the shade, the countess contemplated a moment her kneeling daughter, and an involuntary sigh escaped her. But unwilling that Esperie should suspect that she had passed the night in the chapel, she stealthily quitted the gallery, and gained her chamber, unperceived.

CHAPTER III.

THE WOUNDED.

The hour of mass assembled once more the inmates of the castle. The countess was in her accustomed place, her face cold and calm as usual and her dress much the same as ever, though it would appear that she had given unwonted attention to her toilet, for her head-dress was much more carefully arranged than was its wont in latter days. But notwithstanding all the pains which Madame de Roussillon had taken to make a show of having no fear for her son's safety or the success of the war, the deep melancholy of her features, and the feverish fire of her eyes told a far different tale to the affectionate heart of Esperie.

So great was the awe inspired by the freezing coldness of the countess that her daughter dared not make any inquiries; but, redoubling her attention and her assiduity, she sought by every little plan she could devise to draw her from her gloomy abstraction. Sometimes she prevailed upon her to take a turn in the gardens, and again the sweet girl would urge her mother to go with her to the cottage of the poor blind woman, (to whom the countess gave a regular allowance) well knowing from her own experience that nothing is productive of such real pleasure as the sight of comfort or happiness which one's self has made.

Several other resources were at Esperie's command, and all were called into requisition with the hope of amusing or diverting her mother even a little. At times she would take her lute and accompany herself as she sang some touching ballad. Now she sang of a Red Cross Knight whom his mother had believed dead, but who returned at length from the Holy Land where he had fought the Saracens for the defence of the Sacred Sepulchre; then it was the complaint of Francis the First, "*Tout est perdu fors l'honneur;*" and oftener still would she sing some beautiful hymn to the virgin, breathing the spirit of love and confidence.

At another time she would relate the exploits of her ancestors, dwelling particularly on the adventures of Ysam de Grèzes, one of her maternal progenitors; the flight into France of that bashaw of Bajazet, and his subsequent conversion to Christianity, things with which Esperie had long been familiar, for the countess loved to repeat them. Then she would draw her mother into a conversation on the valorous deeds of the knights of old, or any other subject which she deemed likely to interest her, and on those occasions it was that she displayed the treasures of her fine and well-stored mind, for the noble girl was far, far removed from the ignorance so common to those of her age at that period. She was indebted for a solid and richly-varied education to Father Antoine, the friend and chaplain of her late father. He had made her familiar with the Latin language, so that she might understand the rubrics of the church, and read in their original the early Fathers; she knew as much of history and geography as was to be learned in that age; heraldry, poetry, and general literature were none of them strangers to her, and she had studied botany and medicine, for the express purpose of ministering more efficaciously to the sick and the wounded who might require her care.

Father Antoine had above all made her understand that learning is only valuable in as much as it contributes to make us better and more virtuous, and more useful and agreeable to others; that such sentiments as these, and not the desire of praise or admiration, should encourage a Christian to pursue knowledge; and so well had Mademoiselle de Roussillon profited by the lessons of the good priest, that even her learning and accomplishments were far surpassed by her sweetness, her modesty, and her benevolence.

A month had glided by in this manner and if the countess enjoyed not happiness, she had at least found calm and revived hope, thanks to the gentle efforts of Esperie.

One day as the two ladies were working together at a piece of tapestry in the great hall of the castle, Martial came to announce that the Sieur de Bourguignac, the Count's squire, had just arrived with a message.

"A messenger from my son?" cried the agitated mother, trembling with joy, and perhaps with fear, "Let him come hither at once.—My God! what am I going to hear?" she added with a sigh when Martial had retired.

"Good tidings, I am sure, mamma!" cried Esperie, in an assured tone.

"God grant that we may see him return in good health and covered with glory!" murmured the countess.

"Oh! as to the glory, mamma, you know how brave Galliot is."

"Well! my good Bourguignac, what news do you bring us?" cried the countess, as the squire entered the hall.

"Excellent, madam!" said the latter, bowing almost to the ground—"but here is a letter which will probably tell you more than I could." And he presented to the countess a packet sealed with the well known arms of Roussillon, which the countess hastened to open.

As her eye ran over the lines written by a beloved hand, her countenance grew brighter and more cheerful, so that Esperie, who sat with her eyes fixed on her mother could already divine a portion of its contents.

"God be praised!" cried the countess at length "my son has then walked in the steps of his illustrious forefathers!"

"Never has the world seen a more valiant knight," returned Bourguignac, in all sincerity, "and I am sure his exploits would fill a tolerable volume, and one well worthy of going to future ages."

However exaggerated might these enconiums have been, Madame de Roussillon heard them with a gracious smile, for her heart was that of a doating mother; and taking from her neck a gold chain of extraordinary beauty, she threw it with her own hands around the neck of the squire, saying as she did so:—

"I would that I were a queen, so that I might reward as I would wish, the bearer of such glad tidings!"

"Your ladyship is at least queenly in your generosity!" replied Bourguignac, bowing still lower than before.

"You must know," said the countess, turning to her daughter, "that all has succeeded beyond our most sanguine hopes, and your brother is coming home, covered with glory, without having lost even a single man."

"So great are the goodness and mercy of our God!" exclaimed Esperie, raising to heaven her azure eyes, brilliant with the gratitude which filled her soul.

"Go, then, my child!" said the countess mildly, "and return thanks to Him for this last, best favour. I must remain to consult with Bourguignac on the measures which it behoves us to take."

Esperie kissed her mother's hand, and tripped away with a glad heart, for although Galliot was wont to treat her rather unkindly, yet she loved him very sincerely, and the hope of seeing him soon in good health and crowned with victory, joined to the prospect of her mother's happiness, made her gay as a summer bird.

As she traversed the vestibule on her way to the chapel, it occurred to her that poor old Catisson would be delighted to hear that her son was returning safe and sound, and without a moment's hesitation she changed her course, and ran off to communicate the good news. She had scarcely entered the court-yard, when she observed under the porch about a score of poor creatures covered with rags, and chained in couples like malefactors.

"Who are these poor creatures?" asked Esperie, addressing herself to four men-at-arms who stood near, as though on guard, and whom she recognized as belonging to her brother's band.

"They are heretic dogs whom my lord has taken prisoner, may it please your ladyship, and we have been sent with them here to put them in safe keeping."

"Poor fellows! how exhausted and how wretched they do look!" said Esperie, with her wonted tenderness of heart.

"Why as to that, your ladyship," replied the soldier, "most of them have made the whole journey on foot, and a smart pace we did keep up, for such were my lord's orders."

"And what is to be done with them, do you know?" demanded the young lady in a tone of deep interest.

"That does not concern me, my lady! so I know nothing of it. Faith! my lord should have told us what to do with them, when he sent them here in our custody. But, for the matter of that, I don't think he intends to hang the scoundrels, as they would richly deserve, for if he wanted to make them swing, I wot me well, there was no scarcity either of ropes or trees down there where he took them."

"Oh! do not, I pray you, speak so lightly of them," exclaimed Esperie, earnestly, "I am sure they are very much to be pitied. I shall go now and have them sent something to eat, for they must not be neglected until such time as we have heard from my brother, who, I am sure, would be sorry to have them ill treated while prisoners here."

"I tell you, lady! they are Huguenots," returned the soldier, with a contemptuous toss of his head, "And I am sure that if we fell into their clutches the infernal blood-hounds, it would be all up with us."

"Well, then, let us be more merciful than they, and thus prove to them that they have done wrong in giving up a religion which obliges us to do good even to our enemies!" and so saying she darted off towards the castle.

Ten minutes after, she returned, followed by Jeanneton with a basket of those grapes which Henry the Fourth subsequently found so delicious, as to have some plants removed to Fontainebleau.[9] Another servant carried bread, wine, and other refreshments, to which Esperie first helped the soldiers and then offered them to the prisoners with an air of the tenderest compassion. It was a touching sight to see that fair and noble lady, the very personification of blooming youth and spotless purity, standing in the midst of those dark-browed heretics, all begrimed with dust and sweat, ministering to their wants without either repugnance or disdain, and having for each some words of consolation.

"But who is this that seems to want nothing from us?" demanded Esperie, pointing as she spoke to one who alone lay stretched on the ground.

"He is grievously wounded," said one of the prisoners, "and must needs be in great bodily pain."

Esperie approached the wounded man who still remained motionless, having fallen into a swoon. "Jeanneton!" she instantly said, "go as fast as you can, and bring hither some vinegar and water!"

Sitting down then on the ground, she gently raised the helpless head of the prisoner, and laid it on her knee. The blood was oozing from the head, and when Esperie untied the dirty kerchief which had been knotted under the chin, a large and gaping wound met her eyes. The prisoners all gathered around, each one testifying by his looks, the deep interest with which the wounded individual was regarded. Meantime, the vinegar and cold water had produced their effect; the man opened his eyes, and made a motion of surprise when he perceived Esperie who was thus doing for him all that a fond sister could have done. And why so?--simply because the pious girl saw in him a brother of Jesus Christ, and all who suffered in mind or body had precisely the same claims on her ardent charity.

"You will allow me to wash your wound, I hope!" she said with her sweetest smile, "I assure you I understand the matter tolerably well, and will try to give you as little pain as I possibly can!"

And without waiting for an answer she set about cleansing the wound. Having procured by Jeanneton's agency all that she required for her task, she requested two of the prisoners to support their companion, and kneeling beside him she performed her operation with a tenderness and dexterity which few surgeons could have been capable.

"How do you find yourself now?" she asked of her patient.

"Much better," he replied, and then went on to thank her in terms familiar to persons of an elevated rank. Shaking off then some of the tatters which hung around him, he set about performing some needful ablutions. Meanwhile Esperie regarded him attentively. He appeared scarcely twenty-five,--his figure was tall and athletic, and his face rather prepossessing, now especially, when animated by gratitude, and when the cool water had brought out its naturally fresh and healthful hue.

" They will soon bring you some broth," said Esperie, " and I hope you will not be long an invalid, for wounds in the head do not take long to heal."

" I am quite sure, lady! that the very presence of so sweet a physician would alone effect my cure!" returned the young man, politely.

" I am glad to find that you rate my poor service so highly," said Esperie, as she retired, " and if my mother permits me I shall come again to inspect your wound."

The prisoner followed her with his eyes while a glimpse of her was to be seen. " So then," said he in a low voice to those who stood nearest to him, " Things do not wear so bad an aspect after all!"

" Alas! my good lord!" replied one whose hair and beard were grizzled by the approach of age, "Because a young beauty has had compassion on our misery, are we any the less prisoners of that infuriate Galliot, curse him every day he rises!"

"Courage and discretion, my old comrade!" murmured the young man, in so low a tone that his companion scarcely heard him—"Courage, I say, for if, as I well believe, that little Renaud escaped the slaughter, my father must already know where we are, and he will extricate us, or the devil is in it!"

Marguerite then handed him the broth, which he swallowed at a single draught, and the guards just then drawing near, he threw himself once more on the bare ground, and was soon fast asleep.

In the meantime, Esperie had traversed the oak wood, and descended to the valley, with the graceful swiftness of the fawn, for she had still one duty to perform—a poor, sorrowing parent to console and gladden. The blind woman was seated on the threshold of her cottage, enjoying the freshness of the evening breeze;

her darkened orbs, it is true, could not see the approach of her benefactress, but she speedily recognized her light footfall, on the withered leaves which already strewed the ground, and she called to her children, "Oh! here comes our young lady!"

The young ones gave a shout of joy, and darted off towards the wood, for they had just caught sight of Esperie's white robe, as it fluttered amid the trees.

"Let me speak to your mother first of all," said Esperie with a smile, putting away the little boys who clung around her—"I have good news to tell her."

"And all about my son, I am sure," cried the poor mother, who had caught the words of her gentle visitor, "Tell me, my lady! is he well?"

"He is well, and will be with you in eight days at the farthest," replied the young lady in her soft, musical tones.

"Heaven be praised for that!" exclaimed the old woman, falling on her knees, "And may you be for ever blessed, sweet lady!" Her children followed her example, and Mademoiselle de Roussillon, full of a joy as delicious as it was pure, knelt beside them under cover of the deep blue heaven, while the tear-drop moistened her cheek.

"Oh my God! this is too, too much of joy for one day!" she internally ejaculated.

Just then, the moon arose behind the hill, and her mellow beams, penetrating the thick foliage of the ancient oaks, shed a calm radiance all around the cottage, the light breeze which rustled amid the branches, was laden with the perfumes of the jessamine and the clematis, and the first star was twinkling in the evening sky. Esperie pressed the hand of the aged woman, and slowly turned to ascend the height, her pure heart throbbing with the delightful feeling of the moment.

"Why" thought she "hath Father Antoine so often told me that happiness is not of this world, since it constantly affords us the means of doing good?" With her mind full of such reflections as these, she entered the castle. The prisoners were no longer in the court-yard, and the countess was pacing the grand hall with impatient steps, anxiously expecting her daughter.

"Whence come you, Mademoiselle?" she demanded in a harsh tone, "I have been troubled on your account."

Then, for the first time, Esperie remembered that she had heard the supper-bell from afar, and reproached herself for having neglected its summons. By way of apology she related her visit to the blind woman, and entreated her mother to forgive her want of punctuality. The countess was so overjoyed herself that she could afford a little indulgence for that time, and she hastened to give Esperie an account of Galliot's exploits, fully attested as they were by the twenty prisoners whom he had sent to the castle, together with six mules laden with booty. So interesting to both mother and daughter was this theme, that the night was far advanced before they retired to seek repose.

CHAPTER IV

THE PRISONS.

On the morrow, at the dawn of day, Esperie with her faithful attendant, set about decorating the chapel with all possible splendour: a solemn *Te Deum* was to be sung after mass, to thank God for the success of the campaign which the young count considered as already finished. While garnishing with fresh flowers the china pots, and porphyry vases which adorned the altar, Esperie thought of the prisoners, immured in the dungeons, as she understood from Martial. It pained her tender heart to know that so many human beings were suffering in her immediate vicinity, and she repeatedly said to herself that she would give all her jewels—nay, her lute itself, and her most valued books to be permitted to give them some relief.

For a moment she had her mind made up to have the gaoler conduct her to the vaults, and nothing would have been easier to do, for all the domestics and officials of the household were devotedly attached to her. Neither was she ignorant that visiting prisoners is one of the works of mercy prescribed by that religion of love and benevolence, which provides for all human wants and miseries; nevertheless her unbounded respect for her mother, and that perfect submission with which she ever obeyed her will, forbade her to take any such step without her consent. She, therefore, entreated the Lord to soften the heart of the countess towards the unhappy prisoners, and having finished her pious task, looked forward with impatience to the moment for presenting herself before her.

It was not, however, till the hour for mass had arrived that Madame de Roussillon made her appearance. The great bell had previously gathered together the vassals of the count, and the good news already circulated amongst them had imprinted gladness on every face. When the mass was ended, Father Joseph chanted forth the first words of the Canticles of thanksgiving, and instantly the sounds of joy and gratitude were caught up by the mingled voices of warriors, and peasants, amid which were heard the shrill, and trembling tones of age, and the soft, sweet notes of the village maidens.

The countess was radiant with joy and triumph—the torturing fears of the preceding days were entirely effaced from her mind, and it seemed as though misfortune could never again weigh down her soul—remorse and apprehension had alike disappeared in the exulting certainty of her son's success. Her demeanor was affable and even gay, and it was generally remarked that for many a long year she had not appeared so kind or condescending. Esperie failed not to avail herself of so favourable an opportunity.

"Dear mother!" she said, kissing her hand with that warmth of affection which ever touched even the cold heart of the countess, "dear mother! is it not hard to think that while we here are all gladness and joy, there are several of our fellow-creatures, under our very roof, abandoned to utter wretchedness?—Amongst my brother's prisoners, there is one dangerously wounded—all the others seemed to me, when I saw them yesterday, to be overpowered with fatigue and the weakness arising from long fasting;—will you not permit me to give them some relief?"

The countess frowned. "The people of whom you speak," said she, "are not merely prisoners of war, but heretics—obstinate heretics—who deserve to be brought to the stake rather than placed in confinement. Reserve your pity, my daughter, as I have already told you, for those who deserve it!"

"But, mother!" pleaded Esperie, not at all disconcerted by this rebuke, "if Heaven had so ordained it that my brother had fallen into the hands of his enemies, would not we have wished that the Protestant women might take pity on his sufferings?—Have not these poor prisoners mothers and sisters who are mourning their unhappy fate, as we would have done that of my brother?"

The countess was silent for a moment, as though reflecting on Esperie's words. "This comparison," said she, "between your brother and these base-born heretics is not at all a just or proper one. Nevertheless, it shall not be said that I have refused the only favour asked of me at such a joyous time—do then as you desire to do in their behalf. Martial will open for you the door of the dungeons—give these people food, since you so earnestly desire to do so, until such time as your brother's return will decide their fate!"

Esperie, immediately ran to seek the old servitor more joyous far than the young girl who decked with every ornament, hastened to some brilliant festival.

"Can such orders have come from her ladyship, the countess?" grumbled Martial, between his teeth, for he was astonished by such unparalleled humanity, "why, this little angel will make her almost as good as herself, or I am not here!" so taking in one hand the basket which Esperie had brought, and in the other an enormous bunch of keys, with an iron lamp usually suspended from the wall, he walked on with the slow and heavy step of age beside his young lady, the beautiful personification of purity and youth.

In silence they descended the narrow winding steps which led to the vaults, the foul, damp air of the dungeons, becoming thicker and more oppressive as they went lower and lower, in so much that it became difficult to breathe. Shivering with cold, Esperie drew her mantle closer around her shoulders.

" What a horrible place this is!" she said, speaking with some difficulty, " where one can neither behold the cheering sunbeam, nor run on the mountains,—no, nor even hear the birds sing their joyous carols!—Oh! I do hope that Galliot will quickly restore these poor prisoners to liberty, for otherwise they cannot exist long!"

" And yet many a good Catholic has languished here for years long," and the old man lowered his voice, as he spoke, as though fearful of being overheard, " ay! and they as innocent of crime as you or I!"

" But that was not in our time, Martial," replied the young lady, "for my father and mother have ever been just and humane."

"My lord the count was the best of men," said the old servitor, with an equivocal sigh.

"And my mother is good too," added Esperie, quickly, "albeit that she knows how to make herself both feared and respected as becomes her station."

"I have said nothing to the contrary," was Martial's hasty reply. "Have the goodness, my lady! to forget my silly prattle, and, for mercy's sake, say nothing of it to the countess!"

"Oh! have no fears on that head, good Martial!" said Esperie with a smile, "and besides you have said nothing hurtful to any one, at least that I heard!" They descended in silence a dozen steps or so, which brought them to a low, narrow door covered with plates of iron, riveted to the wood by means of enormous nails. Having selected the key from the bunch in his hand, Martial opened the door, and entered with his young mistress a darksome dungeon, the damp, bare walls of which seemed covered with the tears of the unhappy inmates. By the pale, flickering light of the lamp, Esperie perceived her patient of the preceding evening stretched in a corner on a wretched pallet, but no sooner did he catch a glimpse of his benefactress than he arose to a sitting posture, and extended his arms towards her with an indescribable mixture of surprise and pleasure on his features!

"Is it," he cried, "a beneficent fairy whom I see, or can I dare flatter myself that my charming physician has not forgotten the poor prisoner?—To what am I indebted, mademoiselle! for the happiness of this visit?"

"To God first, and my mother after him, since she has kindly permitted me to come and wash your wound," and Esperie's voice trembled as she spoke, for the aspect of the place chilled the blood in her veins. "Believe me, sir! that nothing would give me greater pleasure than to lighten the horrors of your imprisonment, were it in my power, but my brother is coming home, and I hope he will do something for you!"

"Lady!" said the prisoner, in a tone of deep emotion, "your pity alone is a very great solace to my misery, and to see you makes me feel much less pain!"

"Nevertheless," replied Esperie with a smile, "I must do something more effectual for your relief," and so saying, she proceeded to unbind the bandages from off his wound, which she then washed and dressed with her usual dexterity. "Now," she continued, in her sweetest accents, "here is some linen and some provisions destined for you. Neither shall you remain in utter darkness, for Martial will leave you his lamp; and he will also bring you a mattrass, for I see your bed is of the very worst kind."

"Fine treatment this," growled the domestic, "fine treatment for a dog of a Huguenot . . . ."

"You will do this for me, Martial—will you not?" raising her silvery voice higher than she ever spoke, in order to drown the grumbling accents of the old steward.

"Yes! yes! and many other things besides," said Martial, more graciously, finding it impossible to resist the beseeching look of his young mistress.

"And I will send you a book to beguile the weary hours," added Esperie, turning again to the prisoner, "a very fine book indeed—the Lives of the Saints—wherein you will see how the servants of God bore their sufferings not only with patience, but with joy and gratitude."

And without giving time to her patient to express his thanks, she quitted his dungeon to visit another, nor stopped till she had left with each of the prisoners some wholesome food, bestowing on each some words of kindness and consolation.

"So we are done at last," said Martial, as he locked the twentieth door, "and, as I am a sinner, there are only two or three of them that seemed at all grateful—all the rest give your ladyship but small thanks for your kindness!"

"And what of that?" demanded Esperie, with earnestness, "provided that my visit has done them some good, by administering to their wants?"

Just as she spoke these words, she perceived a small door lying a-jar, and pushing it back with her foot, she discovered the top of another flight of steps, hewed apparently out of the solid rock, and narrower still than those she had herself descended.

"What have we here?" she exclaimed, laying hold on Martial's lamp by one of those sudden impulses so familiar to her—"I will go down there."

"You will not go far then," said the old man, "for you would soon be stopped by the falling away of the ground, which renders this passage dangerous, and even, as they say, impracticable."

"Whither does it lead them?" demanded the young lady.

"Into the bowels of the earth, I believe," replied Martial. "My grandsire often told me that these steps led to a long, narrow vault, which had an opening concealed somewhere at the foot of the mountain, which aperture served as a gate of succour in the time of the wars with England. But that was some hundreds of years ago, and since three men who had gone down into these vaults were buried alive under a heap of earth, which fell from above, no human being has ever dared to follow their example.[10]

"It is well," said Esperie, "to give up to so perilous a way. Thanks, good Martial for the trouble you have taken to oblige me, and be sure not to forget the mattrass and the book for the poor wounded prisoner!"

She then slowly ascended to her chamber, where, throwing open all the windows she enjoyed for a short time the pure, balmy air of the mountain, now doubly grateful after having inhaled for two whole hours the pestilential vapors of the dungeons. In a few minutes, however, she took up her work, being well persuaded that the rich are not more exempt than the poor from that.common law by which mankind, in the person of our first father, are all alike bound to labour, a law whose violation is ever punished by weariness, and lassitude of mind, and leads often to great crimes.

The good Father Antoine had wisely regulated the disposal of his pupil's time—prayer, study, needlework, works of charity, and innocent recreation having each its due share, and so pleasing was this useful and active life to Esperie, that even since the death of the holy priest, she had never for a moment wished or sighed for a change.

On each of the three following days, Esperie, accompanied by Martial, repeated her visits to the prisoners. Meanwhile, the countess seemed to have taken up her abode altogether in the keep, so often did she ascend to its summit, looking out for the return of her son. And there she sat for hours together, her restless eye wandering over the spacious prospect—glancing ever and anon into the narrow defiles, and scanning the mountain-sides—not then as now, bare and arid, but covered almost entirely with branching oaks. Ever as she looked, she hoped to catch a glimpse of Galliot's little troop, but she looked in vain. In vain did she weary her dazzled eyes, gazing out on the garish sunlight, or straining them to pierce the thick darkness of night—still was there nothing visible but the sun-lit mountains, and the green trees, and gradually the over-wrought excitement of hope and joy gave place to sadness and despondency.

Towards the evening of the third day, it seemed to the anxious watcher as though there were visible through the trees a confused movement of men and horses on the slope of the opposite hill, but ere she could ascertain what it really was, the whole had disappeared in the valley below. It was no wonder that the heart of the countess beat tumultuously for she fancied she had recognized, even at that distance, the plume of her son's helmet and his waving banner. Anxiously, then, nay wildly did she watch for the delightful vision to appear again before her eyes on the road nearer the castle. But an hour passed—the sun sank behind the mountain, and still all was silence in the woods and on the highway.

Fear and uneasiness succeeded her momentary feeling of joy, as the countess, sure of having seen a troop of men descend into the valley, began to ask herself why it was that they remained there, as though hidden. Calling to her, then, the messenger Mathurin, the most active and intelligent of all her people, she despatched him to ascertain the meaning of what she had seen.

CHAPTER V.

THE ATTACK.

When Mathurin returned, his dejected countenance spoke of any thing but good news. He informed the countess in a low voice that there was indeed a numerous troop lying in the valley, as though in ambush, but that they were not the count's people. Their chief, he said, was an old man of tall stature, with a harsh, repulsive mien, thick, heavy eyebrows; short hair cut close to his head, and hoary with age, his beard being almost as white. He wore a coat of mail over his velvet doublet, and his steel helmet was surmounted by a bunch of cock's feathers.

The countess turned pale as she listened, for she all but recognized in this description, the terrible Viscount de Vaillac, her uncle by marriage, but from the very beginning of these unhappy religious wars, the avowed enemy of her family. Yet never losing for a moment that presence of mind, and energy of character for which she had ever been remarkable, she commanded Bourguignac to attend her in the tower in order to concert measures for resisting any attack which might be made during the night.

Since the departure of Galliot, the garrison within the castle had amounted to no more than twenty men, including all the house-servants, boys, disabled persons, and old men such as Martial. The arsenal was in no better condition, the young count having selected for his troop all the best arms both offensive and defensive. Nevertheless, the walls were high and strong, the moat broad and deep, and the castle, in short, all but impregnable, except on the side of the platform, where a single culverin might soon effect a breach. But Mathurin had seen nothing like cannon of any kind, and indeed the countess herself knew that the broken and precipitous character of the ground, would render it almost impossible to bring artillery to bear on the castle. She was then convinced that the viscount had hoped to take the place by surprise, and amid all her trouble and anxiety as to the result, she blessed heaven that she had received timely notice of his project.

After some minutes' conversation with Bourguignac, a conceited, shallow-minded man, Madame de Roussillon saw clearly that with the single exception of Mathurin, she must rely on herself alone to direct the handful of men at her command, who although devoted as men could be, and courageous as most Frenchmen are, were yet unskilled in the art of war, and destitute of that quick intelligence which supplies in some measure, the place of knowledge. Any other than Frances would have been appalled by the threatened danger under such circumstances; but her energy and strength of mind were rather increased than lessened by the approach of danger, and, without losing a moment she gave orders to raise the drawbridge. Assembling together in the great hall all the men within the castle, she briefly made known to them the peril to which they were exposed. Then exciting their courage by the lofty names of religion and country, she showed them on the one side the advantages to be derived from a successful resistance, and on the other the shame and the terrible consequences which would follow a defeat, assuring them besides that Count Galliot would speedily come to their assistance.

These inspiring words were answered by repeated cries of "The countess for ever!—Death to the Huguenots!" Frances immediately distributed amongst her little band such weapons as were found in good condition—assigned to each his post, and having given her final instructions with admirable clearness and precision, she re-ascended to the high tower, where, thanks to the brilliant moon whose beams illumined that terrible night, it was easy to see all that passed below and around. Bourguignac and Mathurin were alone called to watch with their lady, but Esperie hastened to join her mother, in order to lend any possible aid and to share in her danger, if danger there were, but this Madame de Roussillon would not permit, and gave her daughter positive orders to retire to the security of her chamber.

Forbidden thus to take any part in active service, Esperie gathered together all the females of the household, and with them repaired to the chapel. Having passed the first hours of the night in prayer, they set about preparing lint and salves, so as to have them in readiness should they be required. Then, as all without continued quiet, Esperie sent the attendants to seek repose, and throwing herself on her couch without undressing, she was soon sunk in the peaceful sleep of innocence.

Saving only the sentinels, who relieved each other every two hours, all the men of the castle slept too; but the countess watched for all, looking abroad over mountain and valley with all the anxiety of one who knows and feels that danger is near, though still invisible.

The hours glided by with wearisome slowness, but still they did pass. The second hour of morning had pealed forth from the clock in the great tower, and yet nothing had appeared to justify the fears of the countess. Bourguignac became quite brave upon it, and began to crack his jokes at Mathurin's expense, alleging that in his terror he had mistaken oak trees for armed men. But the countess quickly imposed silence on the squire, remembering what she had herself seen, and knowing well that Mathurin was not the man to be so deceived.

Meantime the moon gradually sank from the firmament, and all was dark on earth and in air. Frances, although she could no longer distinguish objects afar off, yet failed not to keep eye and ear on the alert. It was about half-past two when she thought she heard a slight, rustling noise in the direction of the oak wood, and it could not be the murmur of the breeze in the foliage, for the gauze veil she wore was in no degree moved, so calm and breezeless was the still night-air.

Frances redoubled her attention, and very soon observed a dark object moving along the skirt of the wood, not more than twenty paces from the walls. It might be, it is true, either a large dog or a wolf, for its height did not exceed the ordinary size of those animals; but very soon this object, at first so low, gradually stretched itself upwards till it assumed the height of a tall man, who was closely followed by another, and then another, until a great number were visible, all of whom bent low, like the first, in passing along the wood, but drew up in good order when near the castle. Thus they advanced in profound silence till close by the southern wall, against which they placed several ladders, but although they tied them two together, they did not quite reach the top.

The countess now saw that the time for action was arrived; she gave her orders with admirable coolness, charged Bourguignac to see them exactly observed, and at the proper moment, recommending him to maintain a silence as profound as that of the assailants, and then resumed her post of observation. The entire troop of the enemy had reached the foot of the walls; and it was plain that they were both numerous and well armed, either with sabres, guns, or pistols. The Viscount de Vaillac was at their head, easily distinguished from the others, even in the darkness, by his commanding height and imperious gestures. His perfect knowledge of the castle had enabled him to choose the shortest and most accessible way, and at the same time to attempt his escalade at that point farthest removed from the apartments of the countess, whom he believed fast asleep.

All seemed to succeed beyond his hopes, for not the slightest indication was there that his design had been anticipated. Already had several of his men, helping each other to ascend, almost reached the top of the ladders, when a shower of boiling oil fell suddenly upon them from the ramparts above,—the effect was terrific, many falling from the ladders to the ground, and some even half-way down the steep side of the mountain on whose summit the castle was situated. Shouts of rage and anguish, answered by the triumphant cheers of the garrison, were echoed from valley to valley, and almost at the same moment a quick discharge of musketry completed the overthrow of De Vaillac's soldiers, who, in fearful consternation escaped to the shelter of the wood, leaving on the ground many of their number either dead or wounded.

On seeing this, the defenders of the castle burst forth into joyous acclamations, and the countess herself began to breathe more freely. But she knew De Vaillac too well to flatter herself that he would so easily give up his enterprise, and without losing time now so precious in vain discourse, she set about preparing other means of defence. By her orders the whole pavement of the court-yard was torn up, and the stones conveyed to the ramparts. She also had them placed so near the edge that it required but a kick to push them over on the assailants, so that even the women might thus do good service. The countess had also caused a supply of bullets to be prepared, together with cartridge, and the event but too well justified her precautions.

The day, at length, appeared, and the rising sun illumined with roseate light the summits of the hills around. His slanting beams were brightly reflected from the glittering arms of De Vaillac's band, who, having turned the mountain, advanced in good order and, singing a psalm, to attack the castle on that side where it was defended only by the moat. Now that the countess could reckon the enemy, almost man by man, she saw that they amounted to upwards of three hundred, from which she inferred that all had not taken part in the attack of the preceding night. At sight of that numerous force, and the haughty viscount who rode in front mounted on his war-horse, the countess trembled in every limb, and a mist gathered over her eyes. The weakness was, however, but momentary, until she had resumed her presence of mind, and found words to encourage her defenders. When the Protestant soldiers reached the platform they were saluted with a well-sustained volley of shot from the ramparts, which gave them fearful warning that they could not hope to pass the moat with impunity.

Whilst the countess displayed in this time of peril, all the courage and energy of an experienced warrior, her afflicted daughter, expressly forbidden by her to appear amongst the men-at-arms, or even to let herself be seen at any of the windows or in the court, scarcely ever quitted the chapel, where, at the foot of the altar she lamented her weakness and inability to render any assistance to her mother. Though fearful and timid as any other girl of her age, and shuddering at each discharge of fire-arms,—nay, even trembling at sight of a loaded pistol; she, nevertheless, ardently wished to be near that beloved mother whose courage and firmness she so much admired, with the hope of sparing her some fatigue, or shielding her from some fatal shot by receiving it herself. One unceasing fear—one continued feeling of sadness now haunted the soul of that young girl, so lately blithe and merry as a woodland bird. Ever was there before her mind a dread presentiment of coming misfortune; and the feeling was perfectly natural, since her only parent was every moment exposed to the bullets of her numerous and ferocious enemies—what then was to be the end of a contest so unequal?—Alas! that future—which had ever appeared to her in such calm and peaceful guise, now suddenly assumed a darksome hue, borrowed from her gloomy fears.

Two days passed away thus, amidst continual anxiety. The stores of ammunition were well nigh exhausted, and of the twenty men who defended the castle three were grievously wounded. Thanks to Esperie's tender and skilful attention their lives were no longer in danger, but they were necessarily confined to their beds, and their comrades appeared overpowered with fatigue. The countess alone was unsubdued—wherever the danger was greatest, there was she found, supporting the failing courage of her people by assurances of speedy succour, showering upon them golden rewards, and defending the inheritance of her son as a lioness defends her young.

On the morning of the fourth day, Esperie having dressed the wounds of her patients, and visited the prisoners in their dungeons, returned to the chapel to unburthen her oppressed heart in prayer.

"Oh, my God!" she cried, from the depth of her soul, "What will become of us if you succour us not?" And prostrate before the cross, she went on reflecting on the impending danger, the very thought of which filled her soul with terror. Just then the noise of the firing resounded through the holy place, quicker and more continuous than it had yet been. Esperie with a shudder, raised her tearful eyes to heaven, and they rested on the image of Jesus crowned with thorns, and his arms extended as though inviting the approach of repenting sinners. Esperie's gaze remained fixed on that noble but agonized countenance, and all Father Antoine's instructions returned with renewed force to her mind. She remembered that, as the disciple of a crucified God, the christian is bound to walk steadily and courageously in the steps of the divine master; that the sufferings of this world are as fleeting as its pleasures, and that, if borne with resignation they may obtain for us an eternal reward.

These pious reflections tranquilized in a great measure the harrassed mind of Esperie—poor lily of the valley, she, who bent at the first approach of the blast,—too weak to welcome the storm or sustain its fury, all that she could do was to confide in Providence, offering to God all her anguish, and imploring Him to protect her mother from the bullets of the enemy. She was still on her knees, praying and sighing alternately, but still much relieved by her act of resignation to the divine will, when Jeanneton hastily entered the chapel.

"What news do you bring me?" demanded Esperie, as she started to her feet.

"Oh, my lady!" cried the girl, in extreme trepidation, "my lord the count has just arrived with his men-at-arms, and a dreadful battle is going on, just without the walls. Many men have been already killed, and it is a frightful sight to see!"

"Oh, God!—my God! have mercy on us!" cried Esperie, relapsing into more than her former terror, and again she fell prostrate before the altar.

CHAPTER VI.

MATERNAL GRIEF.

Truly it was, as Jeanneton had said, a frightful sight to see Frenchmen—brethren one might say—attacking each other with all the fury of savage hatred. The viscount's troop, although three times as numerous as that of his nephew, still laboured under great disadvantages, for it was now cooped up on the narrow platform between two fires. This was quickly perceived by the countess, who put forth all her resources to make the most of the circumstance. The seventeen men who still remained to her, instead of relieving each other, as on the preceding days, now fired incessantly and simultaneously on the Huguenots who fell in great numbers.

Pushed on by stern necessity, the Viscount de Vaillac, with a few of his bravest followers rushed upon the count's men, with the hope of cutting their way through. A fierce engagement followed, in the midst of which the uncle and nephew met face to face. Regarding each other for a moment with all the intensity of hatred, and each measuring the other with a calculating glance, they crossed their weapons, and both cried out at the same moment, for none to interfere. The soldiers on either side fell back accordingly, leaving their leaders to decide the battle.

The two champions darted on each other with equal fierceness, but Galliot, more ardent and impetuous than his adversary, handled his weapon with such marvellous dexterity that it seemed to have the power of the serpent's triple dart. No eye could follow its movements—it menaced in the same instant, the head and the heart of his antagonist, and the viscount could scarcely make a single thrust, having more than enough to do to parry the rapid strokes of the other. Finding himself no match for his adversary he began to fall back, defending himself all the while; but all his caution could not save him from, receiving a deep wound in the chest, even through the excellent armour he wore. Then it was that De Vaillac, like a wounded boar, mustered all his strength, and gathering himself up for a mighty effort, he rushed upon his nephew, and with one desperate plunge pierced him through and through.

Both the combatants fell together, the one scarcely breathing, and the other dangerously wounded. A cry of anguish, such as only a mother can utter, was heard ringing far over the valley, and almost, at the same moment, the drawbridge fell and the unfortunate countess, forgetting her usual prudence in the agony of her sorrow, darted forth to the fatal scene of action.

Whether from pity, or surprise, or that they were entirely taken up with the care of their lord, the viscount's soldiers made no attempt to obstruct the lady, when she ordered her people to carry off the body of her son. A number of Galliot's followers rushed in at the same time through the gates, on seeing which the assailants attempted to follow their example, but were quickly repulsed, and before the viscount had recovered his senses, the draw-bridge was again raised.

Meanwhile a heart-rending scene was going forward within the court-yard. The countess, kneeling beside the bleeding body of her son, continued gazing with a stupid stare on that young face already darkening with the shades of death; but suddenly arousing herself somewhat from her torpor, she called aloud for her daughter, to come to her assistance.

Esperie, who had just heard the fatal news, hastened to the spot, her face bedewed with tears and pale as death. Yet strengthened by her sisterly affection she mustered sufficient courage to extract a piece of steel which had been in the wound, and then proceeded to lay on the first dressing. Then, for the first time, the young man opened his eyes, fetched a deep sigh, and holding out his feeble hand to the countess:—

"Farewell, mother!" said he, "may my young sister be a consolation to your old age!"

The mother and daughter sobbed aloud in

their anguish. "Nay, weep not for me," resumed the count in a feeble voice "Like my father, I die on the field of honour."

Then, speaking with difficulty, he addressed his faithful followers and the servants of the castle, who stood in tearful silence around.—"And ye, too, my brave companions! I bid ye all 'farewell!'—no more shall we go forth together to fight for church and king—but I trust ye will be none the less faithful in religion, nor loyal as subjects. Alas!" he went on, after a brief pause, "light from above doth illumine my soul at this final moment, and I see how grievously I have offended God by my pride and intolerance—forgive me all that my overbearing selfishness has made you suffer:—Pardon me, my kind mother, and my gentle sister, pardon me my many faults, and pray for me when I am gone hence!"

A torrent of tears was the only reply to these touching words. The dying youth took hold of the crucifix presented by Esperie, kissed it devoutly, and laid it on his bosom, then spoke again, though in a choking and half-stifled voice.

"I would have wished . . . . . to be able to confess my sins . . . to a priest who might pronounce the words of absolution, in God's name . . . . . . but I humbly hope . . . . that the Lord . . . . will accept my sincere repentance . . for I forgive him who cut short my life—from my very heart—and I die for the good cause."

The countess, who had hitherto restrained her emotion by a violent effort, now burst forth anew into tears and sobs, when she ceased to hear that beloved voice.

"Mother!" murmured the count, but so low that his words were scarcely audible—"mother—your grief—pains me yet more than my wound—oh!—my God!——"

The unhappy mother glued her burning lips to those of her son, as though she would have prevented the breath of life from passing away, but she only caught his last sigh. Whilst the old and faithful soldiers, dashing from their eyes the fast-falling tears, took up with respect all that remained of their youthful leader, and moved slowly towards the chapel, the attendants of the countess conveyed her to her chamber, cold and inanimate as her dead son.

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Two days had passed since the death of Galliot. De Vaillac's troop had renewed the siege, and the garrison now much more numerous, continued to make a gallant resistance. But the countess was no longer by, to animate and direct her men, for she now never quitted her bed but to drag herself to the chapel, where she would remain for hours together contemplating the disfigured remains of that son so lately full of life, and courage. It was almost by force that Esperie succeeded in withdrawing her from that sad spectacle, for every other object was now indifferent to her. No more was her mind taken up with the progress of the siege;—her critical position, nay even her own preservation seemed of no moment in her eyes, and one would have said that all the powers of her mind had departed with the soul of Galliot, and that she retained no feeling—no consciousness but that of grief.

Towards the morning of the third day she slept for some hours, and Martial laid hold of the opportunity thus afforded, to have his young lord placed in the tomb of his illustrious ancestors. It was with an aching heart that the old man performed this sad duty, for he had watched and tended Galliot's childhood, and marked with almost pride his rapid strides towards maturity. No priest was there to celebrate the obsequies, or sing a requiem for the departed noble—it was only his weeping sister, who, attended by some of her mother's women, came and recited in a half-audible voice the prayers adapted to the mournful occasion, together with the office for the dead. This melancholy task performed, the assistants returned to their several posts, and the sorrowing girl was left alone, kneeling beside the tomb so lately closed on her only brother. Long and fervently did she pray, and calmly meditate on the manifold dangers now more than ever menacing her house, earnestly begging from above the strength and courage necessary in her perilous condition.

Misfortune had suddenly changed the disposition of this young girl, hitherto so cheerful and even gay. As yet only partially acquainted with the sorrows of this life, she already longed for her heavenly home, and its eternal rest; filial tenderness, however, made her ardently desirous to console her poor, afflicted mother, and her piety was so sincere that she resigned herself entirely to the will of God.

Having thus drawn fortitude and resignation from the bosom of religion, she arose and would have sought her mother's chamber, but just as she turned to leave the chapel, the countess entered from the corridor, pale and haggard as a spectre emerging from a tomb. Both mother and daughter cried out in anguish, the one because she saw no more the coffin that she came to seek, and the other when she saw her mother sink back, as though ready to faint.

"My mother! my poor mother!" cried Esperie, darting forward to catch her in her arms, and pressing her to her heart with the tenderest affection. But the countess took no notice of her caresses, and repulsed her with a hand already burning with a feverish heat:

"It is Rachel mourning for her son, and will not be comforted because he is not!" she murmured in a hollow voice—"ay, so the priest predicted!"

"And I—am not I your child?" cried Esperie, falling on her knees.

The countess shuddered; her daughter had just touched the sole chord of feeling that remained unbroken in her heart. "Yes, my child!—my beloved!—but soon will you be an orphan!" and drawing her to her bosom, she burst into tears.

"Mother! mother! do not say so," exclaimed Esperie in wild emotion, "what would become of me without you?"

"May God have mercy on thee, poor desolate child!" her mother answered, "for I shall soon be called hence—yes, I feel that my last hour draws nigh!"

"Then I trust in God's mercy that He will take me too, and then we shall meet again soon—in Heaven," and Esperie raised her eyes with a holy love and confidence to that God in whom she thus fervently hoped.

"In Heaven?" repeated the countess, with an abstracted air. "In heaven, saidst thou?—Knowest thou not, then, unhappy child! that the hand of God weighs heavily upon me for a crime to which I was impelled by the excess of my maternal love?—Seest thou not that justice hath already overtaken me?"

"Dearest mother," interrupted Esperie, trembling with alarm, though she believed the words she had just heard to be the effect of delirium, "dearest mother, are we not taught by our holy faith that the mercy of God is greater still than his justice?"

"And it is true—true"—cried the countess, quickly—"let some one then go fetch a priest, to whom I may open my conscience!—A priest!—I tell you—haste!—for time presses!"

"Alas!" said Esperie, mournfully—"how are we to pass De Vaillac's soldiers, who surround the castle on every side?"

"De Vaillac's soldiers?" repeated the countess, pressing her hands on her brow as though endeavouring to collect her thoughts, while a heavy sigh escaped her.

"Dear mamma!" said Esperie, now fearfully alarmed—"suffer me to conduct you to your chamber—you are feverish, and it is very cold here!" Taking her mother then by the arm, she gently drew her from the chapel.

On reaching her chamber, Madame de Roussillon was placed on her couch, with the assistance of her women. Her malady had already made fearful progress, for her face was flushed crimson, and her eyes flashed with an intense brightness that was painful to look upon. From time to time she uttered some wild, incoherent words, then cries of despair—anon she muttered prayers, then tears would burst forth, and protestations of repentance addressed to some imaginary being—these were the paroxysms of her delirium. The poor heart-wrung daughter prepared a soothing potion, which having administered, she took her mother's hands within her own, and anxiously watched her fever-convulsed features for the desired effect. Alas! the unhappy woman remained for long after in the wild phrenzy of the disease, and ever these terrible words—"I am dying—a priest! a priest!"

ade her daughter quiver with fear. Towards vening, however, the fever had somewhat subded—the countess opened her eyes, and asked in feeble accents whether De Vaillac's soldiers were still around the castle.

"Alas, yes, my mother!" replied Esperie, sadly

"Unhappy that I am!" cried the countess, "I must die, then, without receiving the sacraments of the church!"

"No—no, you will not die!" said Esperie, ndeavouring to restrain her emotion.

"Oh, heavens! that it be not without confession!" answered Frances, with a shudder. And turning towards the crucifix, she implored the God who died thereon to have mercy on her poor soul. Esperie, kneeling beside the bed, fervently joined in this supplication, and her sweet, low voice refreshed the sufferer by diffusing through her tortured soul the hope that so pure a creature must and would be heard Soon after, she fell into a gentle slumber, which gave her daughter occasion to thank the good God for even a short relief for her beloved mother. She then called Jeanneton to take her place and retired full of anxiety and apprehension, but none the less resolved to execute a perilous project which had just occurred to her mind.

CHAPTER VII.

THE CAVERN.

The approach of the Huguenots and the siege of Roussillon Castle had spread consternation and alarm even to La Roque-des-Arcs.[11] The trembling villagers ventured forth but with fear and trembling to pursue their rural labours, and the lord of La Roque [12], an old man of four-score, had prudently shut himself up within the walls of his castle. But after some time this panic wore away, and the inhabitants of the village became somewhat re-assured when it was found that De Vaillac's soldiers contented themselves with pillaging the domains of Roussillon, without ever going beyond their limits.

On that same night when the countess lay on her bed almost expiring, when the shades hung darkest and heaviest over the earth, and the lightning glared forth at intervals from the dense clouds, all was calm repose at La Roque. The lights were all extinguished in the village, save only one small iron lamp whose flickering light shone out far into the night, through narrow lozenge-shaped panes of glass, intersected by leaden frames. This lamp was burning in the upper story of an unpretending house, adjacent to the church, the front of which was covered with the luxuriant foliage of a large vine, which extended on either side over the door-way, its long branches loaded with leaves and grapes.

A young man of small stature and slight proportions, with a face full of a mild and sweet expression, yet thoughtful withal, was seated alone at a table, engaged in deciphering a precious manuscript. That house, with its small enclosure, and its four—neat, but poorly furnished rooms, was the presbytery, and he who kept lonely vigil there was the priest of La Roque. From time to time he paused in his work, to elevate his soul to God by short but fervent aspirations, then renewing his study with increased ardour.

Night was the only time that he could devote to the translation of a valuable work from which he expected much profit for the salvation of souls. His days were entirely occupied by the duties of his ministry, prayer, preaching, visiting the sick, together with a thousand other good offices which his parishioners required from him; thus he it was that made up their quarrels, gave them advice and medicine, too, in their sickness, and provided in short for all their wants, as far as his limited means allowed. The wonder was how, with his small parish and its trifling revenues, he did contrive to do so much good, but the secret rested between himself and his God.

It was said in the village that the fruits and vegetables of his garden (which his old housekeeper cultivated herself,) with some brown, coarse bread, were his constant diet. He also had a cow, whose milk had been a valuable addition to so poor a household, but for several months past poor Blanchette had no more been seen browzing on the soft way-side verdure, and the miller protested he had seen her in the possession of a poor woman lately confined, who was known to be too weak and sickly to nurse her child.

Ten o'clock struck, and the priest placed his manuscript in the drawer of the table at which he had been writing, feeling himself unusually exhausted with fatigue, for he had been astir that morning before the dawn, having gone up the hill-side to cut some fire-wood for a poor, infirm old man who, with his daughter, inhabited a wretched cabin about a quarter of a league from the village. He had just knelt to say his evening prayers, when the storm burst forth with increased fury, and the rain poured down in torrents.

"What a terrible night!" he exclaimed—"may our lady protect all travellers!"

Just as he spoke, a light tap was heard at the door, and a low, sweet voice murmuring in an earnest and supplicatory tone. The priest arose quickly from his knees, took his lamp, and went down stairs.

"Come in quickly, whoever you be!" he said, throwing open the door to a veiled female, followed by a little boy carrying a lantern.

Without taking time to ask any questions, he threw open the kitchen door, stirred up the slumbering fire, and throwing on the hearth a bundle of dried branches which lay at hand, he stooped down and blew the fire into a bright, cheerful blaze.

"Come now and warm yourself!" he said to the unknown, who stood timidly at a distance.

"Father! my mother is dying," said the stranger, raising her veil.

"What!—Mademoiselle de Roussillon?" cried the priest, starting back in surprise.

"Alas! there is no time to lose," and Esperie as she spoke burst into tears, "in Heaven's name come to my mother's assistance!"

"What can I do for her?" demanded Father Alphonse, in a voice which betrayed his emotion.

"Come with me to the foot of the mountain, so as to reach the castle before the day dawns," said Esperie, "as otherwise we run the risk of being discovered."

"It is now only ten o'clock," replied the priest, mildly. "Draw near the fire, lady! and by the time your garments are dry, I will be ready to set out."

"Ten o'clock, said you?—Then, Heaven be praised!—It seemed to me that we were an age on the way, and every moment I feared to see the dawn appear!"

"Sit down, then, my child! and rest a little," said the priest, "and if it be possible, explain to me this sad mystery."

"Sad, indeed, it is!" sighed Esperie, now a little invigorated by the genial warmth from the fire. In a few words she related the events of the siege, the death of Galliot, the illness of her mother, concluding with her ardent desire to receive the sacraments, and that dreadful fear of dying without them which so grievously increased her sufferings.

The priest heard her in surprise, and with evident agitation, several times interrupting her recital by exclaiming in that inspired tone which had long before excited her wonder during his memorable interview with her mother:

"Oh, divine Justice! how terrible thou art!"

—Then again he would say—"Mercy oh my God! how adorable are thy designs!"

But when Esperie went on to relate in what manner Providence had lately made known to her the existence of the subterraneous passage which opened at the base of the mountain, and how she had braved the perils of that dreary way to procure for her poor mother the only good for which she sighed here below, the priest raised his eyes to her face, contemplating in mute admiration that frail, delicate girl—little more than a child—whom filial tenderness and confidence in God had rendered so courageous; while tears of ineffable sweetness, moistened his eyelids, for pure and holy souls are easily moved by any noble act—by any instance of generous devotion. Meanwhile the storm seemed rather to increase in violence—the lightning furrowed the clouds, and the loud, hoarse growling of the thunder became louder still, but louder spoke the voice of divine charity in the souls of those two noble beings, so closely allied in high and generous feeling.

"Time passes," said Esperie, "and perchance my mother is asking for me!"

"Let us go then!" replied the priest, as he threw his cloak around him.

The page, who was Esperie's godson, lit his lantern, and taking his place close beside his gentle godmother, they walked on before the priest, who followed at a few paces distance, nor did he stay to apprise the old woman of his departure, knowing that she was well accustomed to his frequent absence.

All three turned to the left, and proceeded with difficulty through the narrow valley which led from La Roque to Roussillon Castle, the water all along, being ankle high, and the road covered with mud, for the rain which even then continued to fall heavily and fast, had made the path all but impracticable. To crown their misfortune, the darkness of the night had caused them to wander from their course, so that they missed the large oak which Esperie and her page had carefully marked on quitting the cavern. They found it, however, after a long search, and a gigantic tree it was, bending down towards the rocky soil, and covering a vast extent with its knotted and interlaced branches. The little page climbed the shelving bank like a wild-cat, then holding down his lantern, and putting aside the ivy and underwood which hid the entrance of the cavern, he showed the astonished priest the narrow opening.

The passage had any thing but an inviting aspect, but the priest of La Roque was not the man to recede before either danger or difficulty when others required his assistance. He presented his hand to Mademoiselle de Roussillon, to help her up the slope, and then led the way into the gloomy cavern, where at first they could only advance on all-fours. Having gone about twenty paces, the passage, becoming higher and wider, permitted them to walk upright; having followed the windings of the narrow cavern for some moments longer, they reached an iron door which Jehan opened with some difficulty, and within, he found the torch left there by himself some time before.

The priest was then enabled to examine at his ease that dreary dungeon. It was a long and narrow passage hewed out of the solid rock in the form of a vault, and received a little air here and there by skilfully-contrived fissures in the stone or rock above. At regular distances, the cavern widened out into regular apartments, of which some were vaulted, and the roof supported by pillars of masonry. Yet despite these props, the successive falling of the soil above had so encumbered the cavern, that in some places our little party were obliged to creep through the narrow passage, above these heaps.

"Courage!" said the priest, observing that Esperie trembled with fear, and could scarcely move with fatigue—"Courage!—Heaven watches over us!" Just as he spoke, a fragment of rock, detaching itself from the roof, fell so near them that had he not thrown himself before Esperie, it would have fallen on her—as it was he received it on his left arm. The young lady cried out in terror, but the priest re-assured her with a smile. "It is a small matter," said he—"my limbs are hardy, and the stone has only grazed the skin."

"God be praised that it is so!" cried Esperie and her page in the same breath. They went on for about a quarter of an hour yet, when they arrived by a winding flight of steps at the little door which led up to the dungeons.

"So, here we are!" said Esperie, recognizing by the light of the lantern the corridor which she had so often crossed, in her visits to the prisoners. "But what is the matter, father? you can scarcely support yourself. Ah! the stone hath done more mischief than you said it had!"

"It is nothing," answered the priest, but his voice faltered, and he was forced to lean against the wall.

"Let us go hence!" said the page, "I am always afraid of these cells. Hush! did ye not hear something like a groan at the end of the corridor?—It was just like the moaning of a troubled spirit."

"Alas!" replied Esperie, "it may well proceed from my wounded patient; for I have not had time to dress his wound this day."

"Come!" said the priest, advancing quickly after the page, as though he, too, was anxious to quit a place so dreary.

"I will go and announce your arrival to my mother," said Esperie when they had ascended from the dungeons. "Awaiting my return, you can rest awhile in the parlour, and Jehan will bring any thing you may want."

"I want nothing," returned the priest, "if it be not a little while to commune with my God—permit me to enter the chapel!"

"Here it is," said Esperie, opening the small door which led into the sacristy. "Alas! for many a day this holy place hath been given up to loneliness, for no priest of the Lord hath been able to penetrate hither for the celebration of the sacred mysteries, and my brother's remains rest in the tomb of his ancestors unblessed by the ceremonies of the church. Pray for him, father! and for all the other members of the family who sleep below!"

"And for those who have not gained admission, notwithstanding their wish and right " answered the priest in an under tone, as he prostrated himself on the cold marble. No sooner was he alone than deep sighs escaped his bosom, and tears of tender devotion trickled from his eyes.

"Ah yes! may they rest in thy bosom, oh my God! all these beloved ones—my fathers and my kindred, and may thy holy peace descend, too, on my heart, poor, miserable creature that I am!—Silence within me, the old man—corrupt nature—who murmurs in the depth of my soul, and elevate thy unworthy servant to the height of the august functions of my ministry!"

When Mademoiselle de Roussillon came to apprise the priest that her mother expected him, she found him still knelt in prayer before the altar, invoking the mercy of God for the living and the dead. On hearing Esperie's announcement, he arose and followed her in silence through the corridor to the apartment of the countess.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CONFESSION.

Madame de Roussillon was seated on her bed; a mortal paleness was on her face, but her eyes were lit up with a strange, bright light. On seeing the priest she shuddered involuntarily, as though the sight came upon her by surprise, but quickly saluting him by a slight motion of her head, she made a sign for her women to retire, and was accordingly left alone with him.

"Father!" said she, at length, "you behold me divided between hope and fear; for I trust that the God who hath conducted you here as it were by a miracle, will have mercy on my poor soul, and will accept my penitential tears: —but, on the other hand, I tremble when I think of the magnitude of my transgressions!"

"There are none so great as to exceed the mercy of the Lord!" replied the priest, in a grave but sweet voice.

"Even treachery and murder?" said the countess, with a visible shudder.

"If Judas had solicited forgiveness from that God whom he betrayed, even he would have obtained it," returned Father Alphonse again, without raising his eyes which he kept studiously cast down.

"There was a time," resumed the countess, somewhat encouraged, "when I succeeded in concealing from myself the enormity of my crime, but death which is now so near, hath effectually torn away the veil which I had wilfully drawn over the foulness of my conscience —already hath the wrath of God fallen heavily on my family, and the blood of my victim hath been avenged!——— Father! will not that wrathful voice be louder in cursing than yours in absolving me?"

"If Heaven forgives, who would dare condemn?" said the man of God, making the sign of the cross—"Go on, poor wandering child of God! lay open the secrets of thy conscience!"

"Yes," replied the countess "the moments are precious, for Death awaits his prey. Sit down, then, father! and hear the recital of my crime and its punishment—the history of my woes, and sufferings!"

The priest drew near, and Madam de Roussillon continued:—"At twenty-five I was left an orphan—heiress of a large fortune, and my own mistress. Many lords and knights there were who aspired to my hand, but I disdained their homage, for none of them had touched my heart, which I had resolved should only be given to him who could give me a name and title that might satisfy my pride and ambition, the dominant passions of my soul. A year had passed in this manner, when the Viscount De Vaillac came to demand my hand for his nephew, Count Galliot Roussillon de Biron. I knew not the young count in person—his fortune, I heard, was much impaired, and he was my junior by some years; but, for the rest, he possessed all that I could desire in a husband—an illustrious name, and a high reputation for valour and all knightly accomplishments. The campaign once ended, his uncle (who was also his guardian,) recalled him from Italy, where he had served with much distinction, and the first time I saw him was when we met before the altar to be united in marriage. All seemed propitious, for Count Galliot appeared both handsome and amiable. My marriage, performed by the Bishop of Cahors, was attended with all possible pomp, and the noblest knights of the province thought themselves honoured by assisting at the ceremony. But my happiness was speedily blighted, for a circumstance which I need not now mention, occurred on the very day of our union, to show me not only that I was not the chosen of Galliot's heart, but that he had been already married to a mere plebeian—a poor, mean creature whom he had secretly espoused, I know not where or how ——— "

"Go on with your confession, without reviling your rival, at such a moment as this!" said the priest, interrupting her with some warmth.

"Alas! what right have I to revile her?" resumed the countess, in a more humble tone,—"I only meant to say that the woman was not of noble birth; and that, in my eyes, was a grievous reproach, and made such a marriage degrading to Galliot. I might, nevertheless, have pardoned this youthful folly, as I deemed it, had not this first wife left a son who would, of course, possess the right of primogeniture, to the serious disadvantage of any children that I might have. The demon of jealousy took possession of my soul, and my first idea was that of writing to the Court of Rome for the dissolution of a union which was so likely to disappoint my ambitious hopes, but from this I was dissuaded by the viscount." "We shall dispose of this child," said he, "and when his father has lost sight of him for a little while he will soon forget him."

"And was this expectation realized?—did the count forget his child?" demanded the priest with some emotion.

"Never—never!" returned Frances, "and that inexplicable tenderness of his for a being whom he scarcely knew was the principal cause of my crime.—— Alas! father, so great is my trepidation, that I can scarcely go on with my recital. Is it not enough to acknowledge myself guilty?—Might I not receive absolution without being forced to tear aside the veil which hides these painful—these heart-rending details?"

"You could not hide them from the eyes of Him who sees all hearts," said the priest in a solemn tone—"Sinner! go on with your confession!"

"May Heaven give me strength to make this fearful avowal!" Frances exclaimed after a long silence, during which the priest kept his face covered between his hands. "The child and his grandmother languished in the gloomy dungeon, wherein they had been secretly thrown by order of the viscount on the night which followed my marriage.——"

"Was it the viscount who had torn them away from the hermitage of La Roque-des-Arcs?" demanded the priest.

Frances appeared surprised. "The suggestion was that of De Vaillac, and he alone put it in execution, as truly as I am about to appear before God ——— but I had given my consent!" she added in a lower tone.

"I had a son whom I passionately loved—a son, the inheritor of the valour and worth of his ancestors—a son who was my pride and my joy. You cannot, father! understand the power of maternal love—could you feel it, even for a moment, you would perhaps deem me less culpable!"

"Confess your sins, without making excuses for them!" said the priest, coldly.

"Who—who will give me courage to go through with the whole?" and her head, as she spoke, fell heavily on her bosom.

"Even He who forgave the adulteress!" rejoined the priest, endeavouring to infuse into his accents the evangelical sweetness which became the minister of Mercy—"That God whose image this is—who died to save sinners!" and he presented a crucifix, which the countess devoutly kissed.

"Yes!" said she, again raising her head, "He who knoweth all my iniquity, and who hath, nevertheless, conducted you here against all probability. Come a step nearer, father! for I feel my voice failing!"

Then, after a short pause, she went on—"That child was older than mine—had he been recognized, he must inevitably have succeeded to the honours and titles of his father, to the exclusion of my son. For some time I dwelt on the inhuman hope that so frail a creature could not long survive under the privations of imprisonment in a dark, damp dungeon, but the event falsified my calculations. The child, it seems, throve as well in his subterraneous prison as did my boy amid all the luxurious comfort by which he was surrounded—this fact I learned from the man who alone was entrusted with the care of the prisoners. But at length there came a day of fearful memory, when the count was mortally wounded on the field of battle, and before he left this world he made me swear on the holy Gospel to have a close search made for the child of his first wife, and to place him in possession of all his rights, in case he was still living."

A stifled sigh interrupted the countess, but she continued after a moment's silence: "My husband informed me that the old grand-dame had in her possession a deed which secured to his first-born child all the advantages of his seniority. I readily promised all that he wished, but scarcely had he drawn his last breath, when accompanied by Martial, (whom I had been obliged by the death of my former gaoler to take into my confidence,) I descended to the vaults.—— The scene which took place there makes me still shudder ——— At sight of that aged woman, for so many years unjustly imprisoned, and of the innocent child whom she held on her knee, I felt my hatred die away, while a feeling of pity took its place for the moment. I offered the poor woman life and liberty on condition that she would give up to me the deed of which the count had spoken."—" My body is in your power, Madam! but not the honour of my family!" was the answer, and the proud creature drew herself up to her fullest height. " My grand-son is the lawful heir of the Count de Roussillon, and I would rather die than see him stripped of his birth-right!"

" Hold!" cried I with rising fury—" It is his sentence you pronounce!"

Just then, the boy awoke with a sudden start, and terrified by my violent gestures, uttered a piercing cry and hid his face in his grandmother's bosom. Again was my heart moved to compassion. " I give you three days to reflect upon it," said I to the old woman, and drawing a ring from my finger, I threw it on her lap, " You will only send me this ring, in case you refuse my conditions." So saying, I hastened away, tortured with rage, remorse, and apprehension. Next day Martial brought me back my ring, together with a note written in a tone of haughty contempt. My son, my Galliot was just then playing at my side, handling with inimitable ease and grace the little sword which hung already from his belt—long did I gaze upon him with a sort of despairing fondness.

" And thou wilt become the vassal of a stranger's son!" I cried, bursting into a passionate fit of tears. " All the demons seemed to take possession of my soul, and the death of my enemies was at once decided on."

An involuntary shudder shook the priest's frame as he listened.—" You are horrified, I see!" said the countess, " but, father! could I describe to you the terrific struggles which seemed to rend my soul—the dread remorse by which I was haunted—the horrible visions which surrounded my couch from that fatal moment when the order was given to Martial to wall up the dungeon!—could you but know how often the pale ghosts of my victims have appeared to me during my short and feverish slumbers!—and how I have been tormented by the dread presentiment of the premature death of that son, to whose worldly prosperity I had sacrificed even my hopes of eternal happiness!—ah! could you but see the extent of my complicated sufferings, the horror and disgust with which you must look upon me would be turned to compassion!"

The priest was silent, holding his hands still before his face.

"Alas! you do not speak!" cried the countess, in a desponding tone, "and your silence is a terrible warrant—I am lost! ——"

"Who says so?" said the priest quickly, raising to heaven his eyes, now bathed in tears —"Is, then, the arm of the Almighty shortened,—or his mercy exhausted?—Sinner, are you truly contrite?"

"Ah! canst thou not read the language of these burning tears?—Say, my father! what are these heart-rending pangs I feel, and have so long felt, if they be not repentance—deep, sincere repentance?—Alas! with the hope of obtaining pardon for my crimes, I have lavished gold on monasteries, and sent forth my vassals time after time in defence of our holy religion—what do I say?—unhappy that I am! I have encouraged my own son to go fight the Huguenots, that his services to the good cause might earn for him a blessing. It is true I cursed myself, and yet I could not bring myself to regret the crime I had committed since it secured to my Galliot rank and fortune. But no sooner was he cut off, and with him his illustrious line, than repentance—real, true repentance laid hold of my grief-wrung soul.—Too late—too late—I dare not now hope for pardon!"

"Hope is the twin-sister of faith—let it, then, spring up in your soul!" said the priest with calm benignity.

"But that spotless child, and that aged woman who must have died cursing me ——."

"—— Gertrude was a Christian," replied the priest, "and forgave from her heart all who had injured her!"

"How—what sayest thou?" and Frances almost started from her couch; "None saw or heard her in her agony, save the child who perished with her—Martial alone knoweth this fearful secret—who, then, told thee her name?"

"Countess de Roussillon!" said the priest, with touching mildness, "the man whom you consider as having been your accomplice, had compassion on these unfortunate beings—he found means to convey them in safety from the dungeon, before he executed your cruel orders, and a short time after, the old woman died a holy death, praying for her enemies, after the example of her divine Master."

"—— and the child?—the real Count de Roussillon?" cried Frances, almost choking with a mingled sensation of hope and fear.

"There is no Count de Roussillon, Madam!" he replied, with an undefinable expression on his fair, chiselled features—"he himself committed to the flames the deed which established his claim, and certified his birth. In his place you behold a poor servant of God, unworthy of the many graces which the Lord hath bestowed upon him!"

"What do I hear?" cried the countess—"you must be ——."

"Poor wandering sheep, return—enter again into the fold!" said Father Alphonse, in a tone of deep feeling—"the victim forgives you—the minister of Jesus Christ absolves you in his name! ——"

CHAPTER IX.

RALPH.

A DELUGE of tears fell from the eyes of Frances on the crucifix which she kept clasped to her bosom, but her tears were no longer bitter, for the words of absolution had infused the most delicious sweetness and peace into her long tortured mind. The priest, kneeling beside the bed, prayed with fervour that this repentant sinner might receive that abundance of grace which would render her last moments calm and hopeful.

All at once there was heard a frightful noise below in the court-yard—the attendants of the countess were heard screaming as though in mortal fear—the musketry rang out sharp and shrill—the crumbling of a wall was fearfully audible—the clashing of arms, and the curses of the soldiers, all recalled to the mind of Frances, the imminent danger to which she and hers were exposed, when, as though to confirm her newly-awakened fears, some of her men-at-arms rushed into the chamber, crying out, "All is lost!"

With her usual penetration she at once saw the nature of the danger, and the only means of making head against it. "To the breach!" she cried, "let us defend the breach!" And she made a desperate effort to arise from her couch, but the weakness of her body was in terrible contrast with the energy of her mind, and she sank back again, almost dying.

Just then Esperie entered, pale and terror-stricken—"My daughter!—my poor daughter!" cried Frances, in a voice of anguish.

"Put your trust in God," said the priest—"is He not the father of the orphan and the destitute ——."

"I confide her to you—to you her nearest relative—her brother!" said the countess in a rapid whisper to the priest.

"And I will defend the sacred deposit even at the peril of my life!" returned Father Alphonse, fervently.

Meanwhile the soldiers of the garrison endeavoured, but in vain, to repulse the assailants;—left without a commander, and overpowered with fatigue, their courage was already giving way, when Mathurin rushed forward, sword in hand, followed by a few intrepid comrades—swept the breach clear and drove the besiegers back on the platform. Then the brave young man set fire to the fascines which filled up the moat by throwing amongst them a quantity of combustible matter, exhorting his companions to profit by this opportunity to barricade the breach, but the thick smoke and bursting flames made even the boldest draw back. A reddish light illumines the horizon—the fire advances with alarming rapidity, so that fears are entertained that it may reach the interior of the castle, and the cries of the besieged soldiers ascend even to the chamber of the countess.

Esperie, on her knees by her mother's bed, covered with tears and kisses those cold, and feeble hands . . . . . "Save my daughter!—oh!

save her!" exclaimed Frances in tones of wild despair.

"We can still do so," said Father Alphonse. "Little Jehan will conduct Mademoiselle de Roussillon through the caverns to the presbytery, where she will be safe for the present."

"Father!" said Esperie, with firm resolution —"Father, my place is here, and I will not leave it!"

"Then may Heaven protect you!" and the priest as he spoke thus looked on the devoted girl with eyes full of tears.

"Victory!—victory!" shouted the page, rushing into the room—"the enemy is repulsed from the platform—the fire has been stopped, and our people are working hard to repair the breach!"

"God be praised for even a moment's respite!" murmured the countess in a feeble voice. Then drawing her daughter to her bosom, she clasped her there with convulsive strength, and burst again into tears. "May Heaven watch over thee, poor, destitute orphan!—alas! never did a mother leave a child in so fearful a position ——."

"Oh! my mother!—my mother! you must not die!" cried Esperie, wildly—"you will not leave your daughter to the unbridled fury of the Huguenots?—Mother! if you die, I shall die, too!"

A long silence followed, interrupted only by sobs,—the priest mingled his tears with those of the hapless mother and daughter, for, notwithstanding all the calamities which he had already witnessed, his heart was still tenderly alive to the woes of others, and was ever open to pure and ardent charity.

"Daughters of Jesus Christ," said he at length, shaking off, by an effort, the overpowering effects of that mournful scene—"I charge ye—I implore ye, to put your trust in God. Is he not the disposer of events—and cannot He whose word stilled the tempest—cannot He restrain the fury of these heretics?"

"My child! hear the voice of Father Alphonse!" said the countess, endeavouring to assume a portion of her wonted firmness. "He is the only friend who remains to you on earth—follow his advice, as you would mine, to the end that we may one day meet again in that heaven, where, through the infinite mercy of God, I hope soon to be received, notwithstanding the enormity of mine offences!"

Seeing that Esperie now sobbed aloud, her mother spoke again—"Restrain your grief," she said in a tone of entreaty, "lest the sight of your tears may rob me of that courage of which I stand in need.—Listen with respectful attention to the last counsels of your mother, Esperie!—I leave you considerable wealth, and rights more valuable still, which it will become your duty to preserve inviolate—but never let the care of earthly things withdraw your mind from your eternal concerns. Ever remember what you owe to the illustrious name which you have received from your ancestors, neither forget that which was given you at the baptismal font. My daughter! your patroness, Saint Esperie, suffered martyrdom rather than marry a pagan;—imitate her, if need be, and give up your life with cheerful alacrity, rather than unite your fate with that of a heretic:—Esperie, my child! do you promise me this?"

"That, and whatever else you may please to suggest!" replied Esperie, speaking with a strong effort.

"Receive, then, the blessing of your dying mother!" and the countess placed on her daughter's head, a hand already clammy with the dew of death. The poor girl fell on her knees, and her mother leaning towards her, raised her up once more, and held her in silence pressed to her heart. "Enough!" she then said, releasing her weeping daughter from that last embrace—"I have other duties yet to perform!" "Esperie! throw open the doors—call in my women, and all the men who can be spared from the defence of the castle—your little Jehan, and above all, old Martial—let them all come in, for I must speak to them before I leave this world!"

The weeping Esperie obeyed her mother's orders. During this time, the priest prepared the altar in the adjoining oratory to celebrate there the sacred mysteries, so as to strengthen the dying lady with the bread of life.

Madam de Roussillon's domestics speedily gathered around her bed.—"My children!" said she in a faint voice, and in a tone of gentleness which they had never before heard her use—"I have been severe with you all—perhaps too severe. Forgive your dying mistress, then, as ye hope that the just and righteous God may pardon your own transgressions."

The only answer was in stifled sobs, and the countess resumed—"Friends and followers! I recommend to you my daughter, the lawful heiress of your lord and master, Galliot de Rousillon. Serve her faithfully, as in duty bound.—And you, my child! be ever just—but ever merciful and compassionate to your vassals!"

Then looking around in search of Martial, who had remained near the door, she made him a sign to approach. The old man obeyed, and the countess leaning towards him, conversed with him some moments in a low voice. She thanked him with all sincerity for having saved her the commission of a henious crime—he had been the forced confidant of a part of her secrets, and through humility she now revealed to him what she had already told Father Alphonsus. This communication produced an effect on the mind of the old servitor that was never afterwards effaced, and while he listened, his limbs failed him, and he would have fallen to the ground had not Esperie advanced to his assistance. As to the countess, exhausted, doubtless, by her over-exertions, she had fallen into a swoon.

Some restoratives which her women hastened to apply, had the desired effect, and the priest availed himself of the opportunity to administer the Sacrament of extreme unction. Suddenly a supernatural strength seemed given to the dying woman—she begged to receive the viaticum, and the priest at once set about offering up the holy sacrifice of the mass.

It was beautiful to see that young minister of the Lord standing before the little altar, celebrating the sacred mysteries on behalf of her who had so grievously wronged him and his—and that haughty countess finding only on her deathbed and in the forgiveness of her intended victim, that internal peace which not all her power and wealth could before procure her—then that aged servitor with his snowy hair—that young page—those weeping women, and that beautiful girl, forgetting in the depth of her sorrow, the imminent danger to which she was even then exposed. Without was heard the clinking sound of arms—the whistling of bullets—the cries of the soldiers—the roaring of the flames, and in short all the sounds that make war dreadful, but not even this dread uproar had power to disturb the wrapt-up souls of the principal actors in the solemn scene within.

The final moment drew nigh. God himself, at the invocation of his minister had descended on the altar. The countess was sitting upright on her couch, supported by cushions—her features were still handsome, almost beautiful in their regularity, notwithstanding all the ravages of time, affliction, and sickness, now that they were no longer darkened by the remorse of a guilty conscience. The priest approached the bed, as the countess repeated from her heart the words of the centurion. "Lord! I am not worthy thou shouldst enter under my roof!"—and he gave her the bread of angels!—

A long silence followed that happy moment—

Frances prayed with rapt devotion—the hope of eternal happiness had restored to her ashy cheek the hues of life, so that for an instant her daughter ventured to hope that she might still be spared to her.—— But suddenly, there was heard a terrific crash, followed by a yell of triumph, which seemed together to shake the very foundations of the castle—it was a portion of the fortifications which had given way, having been undermined by the besiegers.

"My God! have mercy on my child!—Father! I bequeath her to you!" cried the countess, seizing her daughter's hand with momentary strength.

The sobs of the women—the firing—the complaints of the wounded and dying resounded far and near, but Frances heard them not. Her motionless gaze was fixed on the crucifix, and her icy hand still clasped that of her daughter in a death grasp.

"Depart from this world, oh Christian soul!" said the priest in a loud, clear voice—"Go forth, poor mother!" he added in a lower tone

—"ere yet thy eyes have seen the disasters even now at hand!"

At this moment, the door was shivered into atoms, and a whole troop of soldiers, drunk with blood and fury, precipitated themselves into the chamber with horrible shouts and imprecations. "Kill all before you!" cried a voice, louder than all the rest—"the treasure must be here!"

The attendants of the countess fled in all directions like a flock of sheep before the devouring wolves, and Esperie stood alone, as one petrified, beside the dead body of her mother.

"In the name of that God whom we all worship," cried the priest springing eagerly forward with the crucifix in his hand—"in the name of our God, Christian soldiers! respect the presence of innocence and death!"

"To the gallows with the priest!" cried some of the ruffians.

"Be mine the pretty girl!" shouted another, darting towards Esperie.

"Nay, kill me if ye will," cried the priest, placing himself in front of the young lady, "but beware of laying a sacrilegious hand on her!"

"Ha! I'll quickly settle your account, and teach you to prate to such as we!" shouted the brutal soldier, made doubly furious by opposition, whilst his comrades, greedy for plunder, hastened to tear open the chests and closets.

"If you touch but a hair of her spotless head, you will draw down upon yourself the fiery wrath of the living God!" said the priest, with an inspired air.

"Here goes for your prophecy," cried the ruffian, as he raised his huge sabre. But by an adroit manœuvre Father Alphonsus parried the blow, and seizing with his nervous grasp the uplifted arm of the soldier, he disarmed him by a sudden jerk.

"This way, comrades!" yelled the mortified, but still furious assailant of the priest.

Five or six soldiers ran instantly to his aid and surrounded Father Alphonsus, who bravely defended himself with the sword he had won, though carefully avoiding inflicting any wound on his adversaries.

Worn out by her complicated emotion, Mademoiselle de Roussillon had fallen senseless on the corpse of her mother. "I have her now!" cried the soldier who had first attacked the priest, gliding behind the latter to where Esperie lay.

"Avaunt there, villains!" cried a loud voice at the door, and a young knight without either helmet or armour, rushed forward, armed with sword and pistol. "Away, all of ye! or, by St. James! your heads shall not long sit on your shoulders!"

At sight of this young man, and hearing his authoritative voice, the soldiers who surrounded the priest, at once gave way—all but the ruffian who still held in his grasp the inanimate form of the young lady. "This is my share of the pillage," he said in a dogged tone.

"Wretch!" cried the knight, almost beside himself with passion, and instantly taking aim at his head, he shot him dead on the spot.

"Oh, God! have mercy on that poor soul!" was the pitying exclamation of the priest, as bending over the soldier he eagerly sought whether life was quite extinct, but the ball had pierced the skull, and the death of the wretched man had been instantaneous.

"Where am I?" said Esperie in a weak, low voice, and turning her opening eyes from her dead mother to the bleeding body of the Huguenot—"Great God! what has happened here?" Then as memory returned, she hid her face between her hands and cried aloud in her sorrow.

"Be not afraid, noble lady!" said the knight, and he bent his knee before her—"my arm and my sword are henceforward devoted to your service!" Seeing that she was still silent he went on, "Only deign to look on him whom you have so generously assisted, and see if you have aught to fear where he has power or influence!"

The priest now for the first time perceived that the speaker's head was wrapped up with bandages.

"Can I believe mine eyes?" said Esperie, making an effort to express her surprise, "or is it you whom I see here?"

"Yes, I—Ralph de Vaillac, who owe my life to you, for without your charitable aid I should have died of my wound in that dreary dungeon. Take courage, then, sweetest lady! for all my influence over my father's mind shall be employed in your favour!"

"Ah! but who will restore to me my mother?" cried the afflicted girl, as she threw herself once more on the body of the countess. Ralph cast his eyes on the bed, whither in the rapid whirl of events, he had not before looked, and then he looked inquiringly at the priest.

"It is but too true," said the latter, divining the young man's thought.

"This must be at once made known to my father," muttered the knight—"it will materially change his plans." And drawing from his belt a small hunting-horn, he blew a shrill blast. The summons was instantly answered by two-men-at-arms.

"Remove this corpse!" he said, pointing to the dead soldier. "Go seek some of this young lady's attendants, and bring them here quickly. And, hark further! you two are to remain in the adjoining chamber, so as to be ready to obey any commands she may give you. Place a guard on the door, that none may enter without permission!" These orders were given in that imperious tone which forbids all reply, and bowing respectfully, the men instantly withdrew. The knight himself quickly followed, leaving Esperie alone with the priest.

"Alas! father, what am I to expect from all this?" she timidly asked.

"Nothing from man—but every thing from God!" replied Father Alphonsus in his mild, sweet voice.

Jeanneton and two or three other attendants now entered the room. "Go, daughter!" said the priest, "Retire with your women into that closet, and try to obtain that rest so necessary for you—we shall soon see what Providence hath decreed in your regard!"

Esperie accordingly withdrew, and the priest, left alone with the dead, turned his thoughts on the dangers of his position, and the duties which devolved upon him. The sun was already high above the horizon. What would his parishioners think when he appeared not in the little church at eight o'clock to say mass, as was his custom?—what would become of his patients?—But then how could he abandon the orphan whom a dying mother had given him in charge—the young Christian who was also allied to him by the closest tie of kindred?—and moreover what possibility had he, even if so inclined, to escape from an apartment so carefully guarded?

"The will of God be done on earth as it is in heaven!" he exclaimed with pious fervour. And then tearing his handkerchief in strips, he proceeded to bind up his wounds, which were, however, only trifling, and this done, he took out his breviary and commenced reciting the office for the dead.

CHAPTER X.

THE VISCOUNT DE VAILLAC.

Mademoiselle de Roussillon slept but a little while—frightful dreams flitted before her, and she awoke with a violent shudder. So many afflicting scenes coming on in rapid succession had shaken her very soul, nor could all her piety and resignation prevent her from suffering the most acute anguish. Short and disturbed as her sleep had been it had, notwithstanding, done her some good, and towards noon she mustered strength to rejoin the priest, who had been all this time praying beside the dead body of the countess. As she entered the chamber which contained the mortal remains of a mother so tenderly beloved, Esperie's tears again burst forth.

"Poor child!" said the priest, looking upon her with a glance of tenderest pity—"poor child! do you then regard death as the greatest of all misfortunes?"

"Not so, my father!" replied the sorrowing girl, "I should be rejoiced were it God's will to call me hence this moment, for then I might hope to rejoin my mother!"

"The happiness of seeing God face to face" replied the priest, "must be purchased by the constancy and fidelity with which we serve him amid the trials of this life!"

"Alas! who will give me that courage of which I stand so much in need, now that I am alone on the earth?" said Esperie sadly.

"Even He—your Father who is in heaven, if you will only pray to him with fervour and perseverance!" replied the priest.

"Let us, then, pray together," said Esperie "that the Lord may extend his mercy unto us. That knight who promised to protect me—has he since returned?"

The priest shuddered. "He has not, and it is perchance, a blessing for which we should be grateful," he said in a melancholy tone, as though the question had brought before his mind some gloomy presentiment.—"I have told you, daughter! that it is in God alone you must place your trust!"

One of the most striking features in the character of this strange young man was a sort of instinctive perception—one might say prophetic, which made him often foresee the issue of events—a species of second sight, or celestial gift, which he owed assuredly to the sanctity of his life.

"May Jesus Christ and his blessed mother vouchsafe to shield us!" exclaimed Mademoiselle de Roussillon, as she fell on her knees before an image of the Virgin. The priest said aloud the litany of the Blessed Virgin, Esperie and her attendants making the responses, and while they were thus piously engaged, a far different scene was passing in the court-yard.

The Huguenot soldiers, satiated with blood and plunder, had laid out a long table on which they placed at once three butts of rich old wine, two sheep roasted whole, a score or two of fowl, together with all such other provisions as they found ready to their hands, not only within the castle but in the surrounding farm-houses.

The banquet at length commenced, and proceeded amid all the horrors of obscene ribaldry—blasphemy the most atrocious, and in short all that follows in the train of brutal intoxication. And all these disgusting sounds reached the chamber of death, mingling on the air with the clear, sweet voices of the little band there assembled, as they sang their pious canticles, but they heeded not the tumult below, for their souls were raised to heaven with the inspiring words they sang.

That day of horror drew at length to a close. The sun disappeared behind the mountain, and the moon rose calm and radiant in the vault of heaven. The confused sounds of the carousal had gradually died away beneath the soporific fumes of the wine, and in a little time there was nothing heard save the voice of the sentinels as they answered each other on the ramparts, and the monotonous step of the soldiers who, faithful to their charge, still paced to and fro in the corridor.

Esperie's women had all dropped asleep, and even the young lady herself, lulled into temporary repose by the unbroken stillness of the hour, was wandering in dreams with her mother through the oak wood. The priest alone kept watch over the dead, so inured was he to fatigue and want of sleep.

All at once there was heard in the long corridor, the sound of footsteps and approaching voices—the door turned on its hinges, and gave admission to an old man of towering stature, armed from head to foot, and followed by four men carrying torches. He who now entered was excessively thin, even to attenuation, his gray eyes shone with a lurid brightness; his forehead was large, but much wrinkled and contracted, denoting a very limited capacity, though the whole face had a look of cunning and duplicity, whilst the large, protruding bones of his gaunt frame indicated no ordinary strength of body. Approaching the bed, he cast a disdainful look on the corpse.

"The Countess de Roussillon has, I understand, died last night," said he in a subdued voice which bespoke a certain degree of emotion. "Priest! we wish thee to do thy duty, and bless the coffin of this woman, who was our relative: these men will then carry her to the grave which we have had prepared for her!"

"The Countess de Roussillon must be placed in the tomb of her family," said the priest in firm accents.

"That is, supposing it were still in existence!" the old man replied with a sardonic grin, while the priest raised his eyes to heaven with a deep-drawn sigh.

"And what sacrilegious hand," demanded Esperie, "hath dared to violate the resting-place of my ancestors?"

"Alas!" said the old man, suddenly changing his tone, "amid the horrors of war, the leaders cannot at all times restrain their soldiers as they would wish; and for this reason it is that I have put off till the dark hours, the duty of seeing the last honours paid to the mortal remains of our dear niece. But I will avenge the insult offered to your family—so, fear nothing, young daughter! for the only relative who still remains to you knows well how to respect your rights."

"I ask nothing but permission to retire to a convent," replied Esperie, in a faultering voice.

"That must not be!" rejoined the viscount in an authoritative tone, "a more enviable fate awaits the heiress of Roussillon. Priest!" he added, still more imperiously—"hasten to perform the duty of thy ministry, and return hither with all speed to hear our further orders. You see, niece! how considerate I am towards you—a minister of your own religion will bless the grave of her who was nevertheless our declared enemy—the honours due to her rank will be freely accorded, and none will dare insult her remains. You will also be free to treat your people as you wish. But in return I will expect that you show yourself grateful, and in proof thereof receive my commands with submission, assured that they will result in your own happiness. Follow me as soon as possible to the grand hall, where I will make known my intentions!"

"What!—would you have me leave this room at such a moment?" cried the unfortunate girl, as she sunk pale and trembling on the bed, and kissed with mournful tenderness the ice-cold lips of her mother.

De Vaillac shrugged his shoulders with an air of fretful impatience, but he managed to keep in his rising anger.

"My daughter!" said the priest with persuasive mildness—"suffer me to give back this body to that earth whence it came—necessity would soon compel you to make that sacrifice,—submit to it now for the sake of that God who is pleased to keep an account of all that we do for Him!"

"But surely I need not be obliged to quit this chamber, associated as it is with her loved remembrance?"

"Speak to her, sir, said the viscount, addressing the priest with a menacing air, as though he would not wait longer.

"My child!" said the priest in a low voice, "do not wantonly provoke the wrath of the victor,—reserve your resistance for whatever may be offered you derogatory to religion or your noble name!"

"My God!" exclaimed the poor, tortured

girl, as she fell on her knees at the foot of the couch. She said no more aloud, and in a moment she arose, dried the tears from her eyes, and prepared to follow the viscount who offered her his hand.

"This strange chaplain seems to exercise an unlimited power over the mind of this damsel!" thought the old man—"he must be seen to!" They traversed together the long corridor and ascended the stone staircase which led to the reception-hall.

"What is it you would have me do?" demanded Esperie, perceiving that the hall was lit up as for a joyous festival.

"Oh! nothing that ought to be unwelcome to a girl of your age," said the viscount, trying to force his features into a smile, but those grim lineaments were not used to such, and the effect was sc unnatural that Esperie shrank from him in terror. Turning her eyes from that repulsive countenance, she looked into the hall which they were about to enter.

On a table covered with cloth, was laid an enormous Bible, and close by stood a man of a hard and severe aspect, clad in black from top to toe—he was a Protestant minister. At a little distance stood three soldiers, in shining armour, awaiting the orders of their chief, and it seemed as though their faces were familiar to Esperie.

"Go, apprise the baron that we are come!" said De Vaillac, as he seated the young lady in a chair of state evidently prepared for the occasion.

"He is watching impatiently for your coming," replied one of the men-at-arms, and just then Ralph made his appearance. His fine figure was cased in a velvet doublet—the still unhealed wound in his head was concealed by a small black cap, shaded by a white plume, and his handsome features were radiant with hope and joy, as he advanced with a respectful air towards the youthful lady of Roussillon.

"May I dare to hope, fair cousin!" said he, "that you submit without reluctance to my father's orders?"

"I am yet ignorant of what is expected from me?" was Esperie's calm reply. A shade of sadness passed rapidly over the baron's face, as he turned to the viscount with a dissatisfied air.

"You are now about to hear my will, young niece!—and all present as well," and the old nobleman as he spoke thus made an attempt to soften his ferocious aspect, and to assume a milder accent. "None of you is ignorant of the services I have rendered to our deceased nephew, Count Galliot de Roussillon, whom I reared with the tenderness of a parent, and watched over his patrimony as a faithful guardian should. The affection herewith I regarded my nephew naturally devolves on his orphan daughter, and as the best proof of this, and at the same time to enable me to defend more successfully her rights of property, derived from both father and mother, I have resolved to unite her in marriage with my own son, than whom there is not in the province a knight more worthy of her hand. My reverend friend will now proceed at once to solemnize the marriage, but in order to show a due respect for my niece, and at the same time to place the validity of the marriage beyond all doubt, the ceremony will afterwards be performed by Catholic priest, according to the ritual of his church."

"And is it over the violated tomb of my fathers, and ere yet the grave has closed on my mother that ye dare speak to me of marriage?" cried Esperie, and the words of her indignation came forth with fearful distinctness, though the deep sobs of anguish came fast and violent from her very heart. The viscount made an angry and threatening gesture, but Ralph hastened to speak first.

"Fairest cousin," he said in the softest and most winning accents, "I should certainly have awaited a more fitting time to avow my passion, were I not imperatively obliged to set out by to-morrow's dawn on a mission of so great importance that it could be confided to none other. It would be torment for me, and far from safe for you, that I should depart hence without leaving you under the protection of my name."

"Is not my own a sufficient safe-guard?" retorted Esperie with something of her mother's lofty bearing. But falling back in a moment to her own gentle and timid nature, she turned her beautiful eyes on the baron, as being the only one present who professed to regard her with tenderness—judging his heart by her own, she appealed to his generosity.

"If pity can indeed find admission to your soul, young lord! have compassion on my unhappy state, and give up the thoughts of a union which can never take place!"

"Ask rather my life," replied Ralph with an air of deep devotion, "for it I would freely resign for you—but to postpone my happiness—nay, even to risk the loss of so invaluable a prize when just within my grasp, is an effort far beyond human nature."

"For me then," said the young countess, standing up with an air of almost regal dignity—"I declare openly that I have promised my dying mother never to marry a Protestant, and that promise I will keep at the peril of my existence!"

"What! can this be true?" cried Ralph, in a tone of the deepest grief. "Is it thou, fanatic priest?—shouted the viscount, foaming with rage, and grasping by the neck, the priest who entered at the moment, guarded by the soldiers who had been helping him to bury the countess. "Is it thou who hast inspired this silly girl to pursue so wild a course? If it be so, thy wretched carcase shall pay for her obstinacy!—Listen to what I now say!" he added in a somewhat calmer tone—"I give thee two hours to persuade her to obey me, and if she then persist in her refusal, thou shalt be given up to certain death—ay! and one of slow, lingering torture!"

The priest had made no effort to disengage himself from the old man's furious grasp—but neither did he quail beneath his fierce threats. Moving with a firm step to where Esperie had sunk on her seat, he said in an under tone—"Be of good heart! God will never abandon his own!"

In order to understand all the importance attached by the viscount to this union, it must be remembered that the young Lady de Roussillon, inherited not only her paternal domains, but also several valuable estates which had belonged to her mother in and around Cahors. De Vaillac, who was literally ruined by this war, proposed to repair his shattered fortune by this auspicious alliance, and also to obtain the means of embarking in new enterprises. Thus, no sooner had he delivered his son from the dungeons of the castle, and learned the death of the countess, than he hastened to restore good order—put an end to the pillage, and took upon himself the entire management of affairs, as though he were already the Lord of Roussillon.

But the greatest dispatch was required in the execution of his project; Ralph being indeed obliged to set out on a political embassy which could not be entrusted to another, and if, in the meantime any unlucky chance enabled Esperie to escape, he might bid adieu to all hopes of that brilliant fortune.

As to the baron, the rich inheritance of Esperie was fully as attractive to him as to his ambitious father—moreover, he had learned to love his young cousin with her thousand nameless graces—her beauty—and her spotless innocence, and he had longed with all the impetuosity of his age to pour out his heart before her. But he had neither generosity nor delicacy enough to perceive that it was from herself alone, and by a long series of silent attentions that he must win her heart and hand; and thus it was, that although he shrank from applying violence to coerce the will of one so ardently beloved, yet he would consent even to such a course rather than run the risk of losing his prize.

"Fair cousin!" he said, approaching Esperie, and speaking in a low voice, "I would willingly sacrifice all that I possess, to have matters otherwise than they are;—but in heaven's name! do not provoke my father by an obstinate refusal, for his anger might carry him to some fearful excess, and all my devotion could not save you from his wrath, if once thoroughly aroused."

"May God reward you for your good intentions, if your words are indeed sincere!" she replied, without raising her eyes to his face.

The baron thereupon withdrew, little pleased with his success, and the persecuted girl was once more alone with Father Alphonsus. Both were, however, reminded that to attempt escape were worse than useless, for the measured step of the sentry was heard pacing outside the door.

"This is assuredly the time of trial and tribulation, but it is also the season of peculiar graces," said the priest to his companion in captivity—"You who sow in tears, will indeed reap in joy!"

"Alas! my father," said the poor girl, weeping bitterly, "when St. Esperie, my patroness, refused the hand of Ellidius, she exposed but her own life—while I, unhappy creature that I am! in keeping the promise made to my mother, do unfortunately endanger a life incomparably more valuable than my own—a life devoted to promote the salvation of men, and the glory of God!"

"Alas! none can say or think that he is useful in the sight of God!" replied the priest in a tone of earnest sincerity—"what are we in His Almighty hands but frail vessels which he uses at will, and breaks when it seemeth good to Him?—And even if his infinite mercy had enabled me to serve Him faithfully, think you it would not be the very highest proof of his love were he now to call me home?—Oh! how happy would it be for his poor servant were the term of his wretched life arrived!—how happy were it given me to shed my blood for Him!—But alas! what have I done to hope for so great a favour—will I ever be worthy of such happiness?" As he concluded, he let his head fall on his bosom, and remained for some time so lost in meditation that Esperie ventured not to disturb him.

"Let us pray!" he at length said, starting from his *reverie*—"let us beseech the God of power and of mercy that He may give us strength and fortitude—for without his aid we are nothing, nor can do nothing!"

"First, hear the confession of my sins, father! so that death may find me prepared!" said Esperie, calmly. She then knelt beside the priest, and humbly confessed her transgressions—few and trifling they were. Scarcely was this pious duty accomplished, when the impatient viscount burst once more into the hall, attended by several of his myrmidons.

"Marriage or—death!" he cried out in a thundering voice—"have you thought over the matter?"

"You are already aware of my decision!" replied Esperie, mildly, "it has undergone no change!"

"Thou shalt die, then!" he shouted, in a fit of uncontrolable fury. And seizing her by her long, fair tresses he raised his poignard for the fatal stroke. The maiden closed her eyes, nor attempted to ward off the blow, which she seemed rather to await. The viscount gazed a moment on her angelic face, as she stood thus sublime in her resignation, then throwing from him the murderous weapon,—

"Nay!" he exclaimed, "it is the priest who shall suffer for thy infatuation—for it is he who hath urged thee to this fanatical obstinacy. Guards! seize that man, and away with him to the torture!"

The priest looked at Esperie, and smiled encouragement, but she who had not even uttered a complaint when her own life was threatened, now screamed aloud in the excess of her anguish, and dropped senseless on the floor.

CHAPTER XI.

THE DEVIL'S CHAMBER.

When Esperie recovered her senses, the first rays of the morning light were sporting through the bars of a narrow eastern window, dimly lighting the attic chamber whither she had been conveyed.

Raising herself with some difficulty on the miserable pallet which served for her bed, she looked around with a fearful, anxious glance, and a cry of alarm escaped her when she found herself alone and a prisoner, in that room of the castle known by the name of the Devil's Chamber.

This apartment had been long deserted through superstitious fear, arising from a fearful legend whose origin was lost in the darkness of time, but which, handed down from age to age, kept alive in ignorant and weak minds an unconquerable dislike and terror of the place. Vaillac, who was well acquainted with the fact, had determined to try this new kind of punishment, in order to bring his niece to submit.

Esperie, who had been educated by a man as enlightened as pious, was far from being subject to the vulgar terrors of superstition; but just then when her mind was depressed to the very lowest pitch, these nursery-tales recurred to her memory, and for a moment the fears of her childhood obtained the mastery. Nevertheless, her confidence in the power and goodness of God was in no degree shaken, and making the sign of the cross, she said:

"What have I to fear from the spirit of darknest?—God, who is every where, sees all that passes in this prison, and his sun shines upon me even here."

Then mounting a stool, so as to reach the little pillars which supported the high and narrow window, she looked out. The night-dew still lingered on the tall grass, and sparkled like diamonds in the rays of the sun, so that the fields below were clad with a fantastic vegetation of crystals and precious stones. Esperie looked on with entranced admiration while the beautiful frostwork melted away, drop after drop, and the magnificence of such a scene would have sufficed to restore peace to her innocent heart, had not the remembrance of the violence she had seen inflicted on the priest, filled her whole soul with sorrow and with apprehension for his fate.

Alas! what had become of that apostolic man whom charity, aided by her own solicitations, had drawn into the castle? Had he fallen a victim to the fury of the viscount, or was he still the tenant of some dreary dungeon? How was this fearful drama to end? The mind of Esperie was lost in such conjectures, and prayer alone brought any relief to her sufferings.

About ten o'clock; a footstep was heard on the stairs which led to the tower; the wooden door grated on its hinges, and the gaoler entered the room. He was a man of sinister appearance, with hollow eyes, red hair, and a brutal expression of countenance; having in fact been chosen from all his comrades as the most likely to inspire fear. He was armed with a pistol, an axe, and a long sabre, and he carried a basket containing a pitcher of water and some coarse bread. The Lady Esperie at first shuddered at his aspect; but very soon recovering from her terror, she ventured to inquire what had become of the priest. Instead of answering her question, the man made a threatening gesture, and retired without a word.

The poor girl felt her heart stand still, and she stood as if transfixed before the door which the gaoler had so abruptly closed. But she was far too pious to yield to despair; a copious flow of tears soon gave her heart relief, and the divine consolations of religion were still hers, though she seemed to be unpitied by men. Turning away from the door, she made a violent effort and overcame herself so far as to eat some of the brown bread, then drank a few mouthfuls of the water from the rude pitcher brought by the gaoler, and set out to inspect her prison.

It consisted of the round room of the tower and two large closets, in one of which there was painted on the wall an image of the devil, carrying off in his claws a little ugly old man This rude painting was perhaps the real cause of the legend connected with the tower. In the other closet, Esperie observed an immense oven, an alchemist's furnace, a crucible, and some broken phials, the whole covered over with a thick coat of dust, the gathering of ages.

"What is there here so very frightful?" she said to herself, as though seeking to overcome her own fears. She then looked out once more through the window, but without perceiving any human being; it would seem, in fact, that the whole country was deserted since the taking of the castle.

When the evening was come, Esperie said her prayers and lay down on her pallet, not without some apprehension at the prospect of passing the night alone in such a place. Scarcely, however, had she stretched herself on the bed, when a sweet sleep sealed her eyelids, nor did she wake till the following morning.

The morning being come, she arose, much

refreshed, and more confident than ever in the protection of that good God who is never invoked in vain. Kneeling she adored him with fervour, and thanked Him for all his mercies, then eat a little of her bread, washed herself with the water that had remained over night in the pitcher, made up her bed, and looked once more from the window. Then, in order to create a little employment for her mind, she set to work composing a hymn to the Virgin, which she afterwards sang with much consolation to herself. When the gaoler returned at ten o'clock with her allowance for the day, she touchingly renewed her entreaties that he would tell her something of the priest, but with the same success as before; the door was again slammed to, with the same menacing gesture, but the effect was no longer so powerful on Esperie's mind.

Several days had passed in this way, and Lady Esperie, although more and more anxious for the fate of Father Alphonse, still felicitated herself on the absence of the viscount, whose presence she dreaded more than aught else.

She even began to feel a sort of tranquillity, approaching to peace, dreary as was the solitude of her prison.

One afternoon, while she stood on the stool at the window, amusing herself by watching the motions of a vulture hovering in the air over the castle, a light tap was suddenly heard at the door, and Esperie heard it with a shudder; the gaoler had come long before, and, besides, he was not wont to announce himself so politely.

"Come in!" said Esperie, and as she spoke she placed her hand on her heart, as though to still its violent throbbing.

The key turned in the lock, and a large, woman entered, with a jovial, and good-humoured cast of countenance, though she affected an air of mystery.

The Lady Esperie would willingly have run to meet her, so glad was she to see a female again approaching her; she, however, concealed her emotion, and waited in silence till the woman spoke:

"I can tell your ladyship that I had no small trouble in getting to see you;" she said, with a low salutation, "it is so hard to escape the eye of that cross-grained Gobiard!—But, no matter, here I am at last, ready and willing to serve you: how rejoiced my poor master will be when he hears that I have made my way to you!"

"Who are you, then, that appears so kind, and who is your master, that he takes an interest in my fate?" demanded Esperie.

"The baron Ralph de Vaillac, my lady, whom I nursed with my own milk,—a good and brave knight if there is one to be had. He is dying with grief because of your being unhappy, and he sends me hither unknown to his father, to furnish you, in secret, with every thing that you may require."

Esperie was touched by these words, for she was far too ingenuous to suspect the snare set for her by Ralph in concert with his father, in order to try the effect of a show of kindness, as imprisonment, and privation, and the fear of death had all failed to shake her resolution.

"What I am most anxious about," said Esperie, "is to know what has become of my companion in misfortune, that worthy priest who has suffered so much on my account."

"He still lives," replied the nurse, "but he is a prisoner in the vaults."

"God be praised for having preserved his life!" cried the young lady, with pious fervour, "I may, then, hope to see him again!"

"It is said that his life is in your hands;" returned the artful nurse; and you are to decide the matter yourself when the viscount and my young lord come back to the castle.

"So the viscount, too, is absent?" inquired Esperie, timidly.

"Yes, and will be, for eight days yet," replied the nurse.

This news produced a singular effect on Esperie; it seemed to her as though she breathed more freely, knowing him absent; she felt as though a heavy load were taken from off her heart, and so prone is the young heart to confide in the future, that these eight days appeared an age of happiness in perspective.

"And now let me fulfil my master's intentions," said the woman, as she presented several articles likely to be the most acceptable under the circumstances; there were books from the library of the castle, paper, pens, and ink, with a basket full of provisions, and cakes of every kind.

"Hide all these in your closet," said the nurse, whose name was Adelaide, "for if Gobiard espied any of them, it would spoil all our plans."

So saying, she withdrew; promising, however, to return next day.

When Esperie found herself again alone, her first impulse was to return thanks to God for the favours he had just bestowed upon her. From the joy which lit up her features, one might have thought she had been promised a speedy deliverance; but was it not a great deal for the poor lonely prisoner to be again attended by one of her own sex, who appeared, also, to take an interest in her; and then was it not more than pleasure to know that the priest had not been deprived of life through her means, as she had so long apprehended? Even the books which she had received were the source of much consolation. Truly that day was for her a day of hope and happiness. She was deeply sensible of Ralph's kindness, and rejoiced that he had none of his father's vindictive cruelty of disposition; and she fervently prayed that God might reward his charity, by bringing him back into the fold of Catholicity.

On the following day, Esperie looked anxiously forward to Adelaide's visit, but her patience was not long tried, for the gaoler was not long gone when the nurse appeared, a smile on her lips, and a large parcel under her arm.

"Here is some clean linen, and some clothes that are fitting for your ladyship's wear," said she, as she ostentatiously displayed one after another several rich and valuable articles of wearing apparel.

Esperie thankfully accepted the linen, but refused all the rest, entreating Adelaide to procure for her a single robe of black, as mourning for her mother.

"You shall have it to-morrow," replied the nurse, "for my master has given me orders to provide whatever you ask. He is so kind, and so generous!—Truly any woman may be happy that gets him for a husband:—why do you not consent, my lady, to have him at once?"

Esperie could only repeat what she had already said to the viscount, whereupon Adelaide laughed heartily at what she called her childish folly, and she went on to praise the baron in such exaggerated terms, that Esperie was heartily tired. Her visit appeared that day to be protracted to an unreasonable length, and when she at last quitted the room, the young lady felt relieved from a painful constraint.

Next morning came the nurse with the mourning dress: but her solicitations on behalf of Ralph were still more pressing than on the preceding evening, and from that time her importunities became so direct and so persevering, that even Esperie could not but see the snare.

One evening as she sat alone in her cheerless prison, sadly reflecting on the intelligence she had heard from Adelaide, that the viscount and his son were daily expected at the castle, and begging the divine assistance in her approaching trials, an arrow was suddenly shot through the bars of the window and fell at her feet. Esperie's first emotion was that of terror; but very soon, urged by instinctive curiosity, she picked up the arrow, and found a paper pasted on it, with these consoling words:

"I have found means to reach you; be prepared to set out to-night with your faithful servant,

MATHURIN."

Esperie's heart beat tumultuously. "My God!" she fervently exclaimed, "second the designs of him who is working for my deliverance; Lord! have compassion on my state!"

She could say no more, so great was her emotion, but her prayer was not lost—it ascended to God on the wings of love, and hope, divine hope, as one within her soul.

Night came on, and Esperie hastily made her trifling preparation for departure; then, taking her station at the window, she looked anxiously out to see where the promised succour was to come from. But she watched in vain; silence reigned over the valley and the hills around, and the only figure she saw was that of a poor woodman, who was slowly wending his way home, tottering under a heavy load of faggots.

When the night became so dark that she could no longer distinguish surrounding objects, she occupied herself with thinking by what means Mathurin could succeed in eluding the vigilance of the gaoler and the guards. Her imagination became excited, and the blood coursed wildly through her veins. If that brave fellow failed in his enterprise, would not his life be the forfeit for his devotion to her interests? This idea made her tremble all over, and she almost regretted that he had undertaken to deliver her; but in a moment after, passing with the elasticity of youth to far different thoughts, she began to fancy herself again free and happy, rambling through green fields in the fresh air of heaven, at liberty to thank her liberator as she could wish, and to reward all those who had ever rendered her a service.

She thought of the priest of La Roque, and of what she would do to attempt his deliverance. She was not long in arranging her plan:

the bishop of Cahors would not refuse her that assistance which she would go in person to solicit of him; his troops would, with God's help, recover the castle, and the priest of La Roque, restored to liberty, would resume his life of charity and good works, but with far better resources, for Esperie's fortune was immense, as her mother had assured her a little before her death; and what better use could she make of it than to employ it in relieving the unfortunate?

All these thoughts were embodied, if one might say so, in Esperie's mind; she could almost see the actors in the scenes her fancy painted, and her agitation was excessive.

Meanwhile the hours glided by, and still no sound broke in on the dead silence of the night, save the periodical hooting of the screech-owl. Alas! Mathurin must have fallen, such was Esperie's thought, and her fears returned with redoubled weight, for next day the viscount was expected to return—but forcing her mind from these harrowing apprehensions, she tried to pray, and to resign herself entirely to the will of God.

Suddenly a distant noise was heard; it seemed like the detonation of several musket-shots repeated by the echos. Instantly a cry of alarm rang out from the donjon tower, and in a moment all was in motion within the castle. The Huguenot garrison, surprised from their sleep, began hastily to arm themselves, without knowing whence the danger came. The officers were heard calling out their orders, and the soldiers speedily ran to the ramparts. All this tumult and disorder was heard even by the Lady de Roussillon where she stood trembling by the window, not knowing whether she ought to hope or fear. With straining eye, and listening ear, she awaited in fearful suspense the result of this new drama.

After a while she heard a light step on the staircase, the door of her chamber was noiselessly opened, and a man advanced through the darkness, who taking hold of her hand, said: "Follow me!"

The young lady obeyed without saying a word. They groped their way through the long corridor which led to the tower, descended a narrow spiral staircase, and reached without any obstacle the landing-place of the first story, dimly lighted by a small lamp which stood in the embrasure of a window.

"Whither are we going, and what are your plans?" demanded Esperie. But, far from answering, her guide motioned her to be silent, let go her hand, and blew out the light, but not before the young lady had discovered that his face was carefully concealed beneath a black velvet mask. A frightful suspicion darted through her mind:—if it were not Mathurin after all!

Influenced by this horrible doubt, it seemed to her that the man in the black mask was taller and more robust than Mathurin. Not knowing what course to pursue, she thought for a moment of endeavouring to regain her tower, but her conductor instantly returned to her side, and seizing once more her trembling hand he would have drawn her away. Esperie at first resisted, crouching down through a sort of instinctive fear, and ready to call for help against him whom she had so lately regarded as her liberator; but her strength being entirely exhausted by the strength of her emotions, she found herself utterly unable to cry out as she intended: her senses too gave way and she sank motionless on the floor. The man who had conveyed her from the tower, was entirely disconcerted by this untoward accident; he stooped, and whispered some words in her ear, but no answer was made. He stood a moment musing on what he had best do, and he struck his hand on his brow, as though in despair.

Just then, steps were heard on the floor above, and a female voice called aloud on the young countess. All hesitation was then at an end; a sudden resolution nerved Esperie's guide, and kneeling down on the staircase, he raised the lady on his shoulders, and hurrying along as though he carried a little child, he descended the stairs.

CHAPTER XII.

THE ABBEY OF LEYME.

When the dawn illumined the horizon, its dim light guided the uncertain march of a singular cavalcade which journeyed along by a winding footpath. First came an armed man and a little boy mounted on the same horse, then a young girl robed in black and seated on a mule, and last of all, was an ecclesiastic, wounded and pale, and emaciated from long suffering and privation.

"So poor Martial died from the effects of that shot?" inquired the young girl, sadly.

"If he were living, would he not be with you?" returned the man-at-arms, who was no other than Mathurin.

"Alas! how many mifortunes have I innocently caused!" said Esperie with a heavy sigh. "Martial, Bourguignac, Tiéry, Muridan, and so many others have fallen in our defence; Father Alphonse has suffered grievously while in the hands of these infatuated men; and you, my poor Mathurin, whom I foolishly mistook for another, in the excess of my terror, have you not risked your life to extricate me from that horrid tower? And when I think that instead of seconding your exertions, I did but increase your danger! . . . . .

"Do not my life and all belong to you?" interrupted the servitor. "This time, at least, we have succeeded as well as heart could wish."

"Yes, since we find ourselves at liberty; but what of those worthy peasants who helped you in your enterprise, are they also safe?"

"They heard my signal," said Mathurin, "for their answer was quickly returned; we may be sure then that they had time to effect their retreat before the day-light disclosed to the Huguenots, the real number of their assailants."

"Your plan was well conceived, and as well executed," said the priest, riding up, for he had been hitherto a little behind the others.

No sooner did this good little Jehan tell me: "There is a subterraneous passage into the castle," said Mathurin, laying his hand caressingly on the boy's fair hair, "than I understood that there was still a chance—an all but certainty—that we could save you both. The whole difficulty was to bring together in so short a time the number of men necessary for feigning a nocturnal attack, which would employ the garrison on the ramparts, and thus leave me time and opportunity to reach you. But God was on your side, and He crowned my efforts with success."

"And He will reward you for what you have done," replied the priest, "for we know that he takes note of even a cup of cold water given in his name."

"My best reward would be to see you restored to health, father, and both of you in a place of safety."

"Are you sure that this is the way to the Abbey?" inquired the young lady after a short silence.

"Oh! have no fears on that head, my lady," returned Mathurin, "we shall get there before night-fall."

"How surprised and rejoiced Mother Mary Angel will be to see me!" said Esperie.

Madame Mary des Anges, a relative of Count Galliot was Superior of the Abbey of Leyme [14] and Father Alphonse had at once agreed to Esperie's proposal of seeking an asylum with her.

They rode on during the day over mountain, hill, and valley, notwithstanding the extreme weakness of both the liberated prisoners, nor stopped but once to take a slight repast and let their beasts feed a little.

Towards evening the travellers, overpowered with fatigue, found themselves entering a deep ravine, stretching between two mountains whose sides were covered with tufted beech-trees, giving to the valley an aspect so gloomy and so dreary that it might be taken for some remote desert: the murmur of the wind, as it rustled among the branches of the trees, was the only sound that broke in on the silence of the place, and the very animals to keep aloof from its vicinity. Yet it was in the very midst of that vale that the monastery stood, a vast pile of building composed of four distinct ranges, of which three formed so many sides of an oblong square, divided by the fourth, into two courtyards of unequal size.

"Why is it that no one answers?" said Mathurin, after he had twice rung the bell at the outer gate.

"I know not how it is, but I feel afraid of this place," drawing near to his companions.

"What does that mean?" said Mathurin again, when he had alighted from his horse, "see here—the lock is broken, and the gate opens of itself?"

They then entered the outer court, but neither saw nor heard any one.

"Some misfortune must have happened to the nuns," observed Jehan.

"So I fear," said the priest, as they all entered the chapel.

There, a terrific spectacle presented itself to their eyes. The bodies of five nuns, and that of the Almoner, lay mangled and mutilated in front of the altar, and all around were the fragments of the statues of the saints, which had been torn from their niches and dashed to pieces on the pavement; the tabernacle lay open; the sacred vases, the silver lamps, and the golden candlesticks had all disappeared; it was indeed the abomination of desolation throughout all the holy place.

"The Huguenots have passed this way," said Mathurin to his companions.

"My God, pardon these thy erring children!" cried the priest aloud, as he fell on his knees.

With tearful eyes and swelling hearts, our little party quitted the chapel and penetrated to the second court, where a new scene of devastation awaited them. All around were strewed shattered doors, fragments of wall, dead bodies of women lying here and there, with their garments in tatters, heads separated from their bodies, noses and ears cut off, hearts torn out, and heaps of smoking ashes.

"The monsters!" exclaimed Esperie, supporting herself with difficulty.

"Vengeance!" cried the page, and he placed his hand on his sword.

"Vengeance!" re-echoed Mathurin.

"My God!—my God! forgive them!" sighed the priest again, with his low, mournful voice. "My friends, we are commanded by Our Lord to do good for evil, and if Catholics had always observed that maxim of the Gospel, we should not now have so many misfortunes to deplore. But let us try whether there be not some living creature hereabouts to whom we could render assistance.

By the light of the torches which Mathurin hastened to light, they visited every corner of the vast edifice, and found every where traces of pillage, silence and death.

They entered a magnificent garden, adorned with pilasters, and statues of the saints, and full of rare fruit trees; a small streamlet, escaping from the crevice of a rock, flowed with a murmuring sound, into the basin which served as a reservoir. Esperie, who was perfectly exhausted with fatigue, took up a little of the water in the hollow of her hand, and put it to her lips, hoping thus to quench her thirst, but instantly a cry of horror escaped her.

"It is blood—it is blood!" she cried out, while a convulsive trembling shook her every limb. Mathurin came forward with his torch, and too surely the water was red with blood.

"Oh, horror!—horror!" cried the page, shrinking back in disgust.

"Sad result of civil warfare!" said the priest with a shudder.

"Look at that dead body hanging from the topmost branch of the apple-tree!" said Mathurin, pointing to the corpse of a man with a long beard, and having on a brown habit.

"It is a lay-brother of the convent, the gardener perhaps," said the priest with a heavy sigh: "nothing has escaped the fury of those barbarians."

"Her ladyship is half dead with fatigue," observed Mathurin, as he supported the tottering steps of the young countess, "let us leave this frightful place, and seek an asylum for the night."

"Wait for me here till I return," said the priest, "I must renew my search." And taking the torch from the young man's hand, he walked along by the streamlet.

"Let us all keep together, I pray you!" said Esperie, mustering all her strength to follow the priest.

At the end of the garden they found a small oratory of white marble, adorned with pillars, supporting figures of angels. At its farther extremity stood a statue of the Blessed Virgin.

"This is the well-spring of the blood," said the priest, as he found his feet immersed in clotted gore, and at the moment all were struck dumb by seeing the number of dead bodies heaped together in that narrow space.

"Death — every where death!" exclaimed the priest bitterly, "but alas! we come too late."

"Hark! what do I hear?" said Esperie, "would you not think it was a stifled moan?" All listened in breathless attention.

"It was but the murmur of the breeze in the foliage," said Mathurin.

"Hush!" cried the priest, in his turn, "that was surely a sigh I just now heard." He hastily turned over each of the bodies, but not one showed a symptom of life.

"It is from this spot that the sound seems to come," observed the page, as he pointed to the pedestal of the statue.

"Mercy!" said a plaintive voice which seemed to issue from beneath the ground.

The priest hastened to the spot with his torch. A small niche was discovered in the pedestal, and in it was crouched a young novice bathed in her own blood.

"Fear nothing, poor maiden!" said the priest in a soothing tone; then, giving the torch to the page, he gently drew her from her hiding-place, and with Mathurin's assistance conveyed her to one of the cells of the convent.

"Let me examine her wounds," said Esperie, who seemed to have recovered her strength with the prospect of being serviceable to another.

A long slash furrowed the fair face of the novice, another wound was on her right arm, and a third on her shoulder; but happily none of these wounds were dangerous, and there was reason to hope that with care and repose her health might soon be restored.

The Lady Esperie encouraged the novice

with words of tenderest kindness, then proceeded to wash her wounds, and took her place beside her to watch the night. Her companions retired to the next apartment to seek that rest of which they stood so much in need

As Esperie had foreseen, the wounded girl was next day so far recovered as to be able to relate the dreadful scenes of which she had been the witness. But her recital gave little or no additional information. It was indeed the Huguenots who had taken and pillaged the convent. The terrified nuns had fled before them, like doves on the approach of the vulture; some had implored their pity, but neither tears nor prayers could save them from the brutality of the soldiers. The Almoner, the Superior and several others had withdrawn into the sanctuary with the hope of defending it from insult or desecration, but their fate was like that of all the others, and the sanctuary was left to the furious hatred of the enemies of religion. No human being escaped, of all the numerous inmates of the convent, but the novice herself, whose name was Angelica. She alone survived to tell the dreadful tale, but even she had been left for dead amongst the others, and had crawled into the niche when she had recovered her senses.

Her recital was broken with tears and sobs, and Esperie had to encourage her from time to time as she proceeded.

"We shall part no more," said the young countess, as she embraced the novice, "you shall henceforward be my sister. As soon as you are able to bear the journey we shall go to Cahors, and once within the walls of that stronghold, we have nothing to fear from the fury of the Huguenots.

"God alone knows," said the priest, raising his eyes to heaven, with a convulsive shudder. "My children," he resumed in a calmer tone, "there is but one thing to be dreaded here below, and that is sin; to the faithful Christian, what signify all the rest?—What are all the other ills of poor mortality but passing trials which are to merit for us an eternity of happiness?"

He then withdrew, for he had still a sacred duty to perform. Assisted by Mathurin, he dug out a large trench in the cemetery, blessed it with the usual ceremonies of the Church, and decently interred all the bodies he could find. This task employed the greater part of the day, and having past that night also in the convent, the travellers, finding Angelica strong enough for the journey, set out next day for Cahors, carefully shunning the high roads, for fear of falling into the hands of the Huguenots.

CHAPTER XIII.

EBRARD DE ST. SULPICE.

On that same day when the Lady of Roussillon and her feeble escort reached Cahors, not with the equipage and attendance that beseemed her rank and fortune, but as a fugitive, prisoner escaping from her oppressors, some unusual movement was going forward in that usually quiet city.[15] The bells rang out, as for a festival, the people thronged eagerly to the suburb of La Barre, and the windows all along the streets were adorned with garlands and gay streamers, and the road from the bridge of Valentre[16] to the cathedral was strewn with evergreens and flowers. But it was in the cathedral[17] that the greatest pomp was displayed; a thousand tapers lit up the sanctuary, aromatic oil burned in the silver lamps, and the altar was radiant with brilliant ornaments.

Esperie, who had been drawn into the Church by her ardent desire to collect her thoughts and compose her mind before the Lord, had not taken her place amongst the noble ladies who graced the galleries, but mingled with the crowd, she knelt on the cold flags, and was praying with rapt devotion, when suddenly a distant noise was heard, and Esperie raised her head. She then perceived a solemn procession of priests advancing up the aisle from the grand door to the high altar. Under a canopy of crimson velvet embroidered with gold, walked with an air of modest dignity, the new bishop, Ebrard de St. Sulpice who was that day installed in his see. He was followed by his principal dignitaries.

According to the ancient custom, the Viscount de Sessac, in a white jacket, and his right leg bare, had gone to the bounds of the country to meet the prelate; he was to have conducted him in this way to the suburb, holding his mule by the bridle, then to put on his cloak, attend him to the cathedral, and wait upon him at table; [18] but Ebrard had refused this silly homage, which ill suited the unassuming modesty of his character. The viscount walked by his side, clad in brilliant armour.

No sooner had the prelate set his foot within the church, than the *Te Deum* burst forth, in the clear, ringing voices of the children of the choir, and as the prelate advanced up the aisle, he gave his blessing on one side and on the other. The Lady Esperie cast her eyes on him from whom she hoped for succour and protection, and she was struck with surprise on beholding the youthfulness of his appearance. [19] Ebrard was, in fact, but eighteen years old; the Sorbonne had obtained a dispensation from the pope because of his distinguished abilities and eminent virtues; his face bore the impress of his high qualities, and there was in his look an angelic mildness which at once inspired confidence.

The bishops of Cahors, who were counts paramount since the war of the Albigenses,[20] had the privilege of officiating pontifically in full military costume, and according to this ancient practice, helmet and sword, cuirass and guantlets had been placed on the altar. Ebrard mildly requested them to be removed to a table near, and he then celebrated the holy sacrifice, with a fervency of devotion which excited universal admiration.

Scarcely was he installed in the episcopal palace [21] when Father Alphonse, anxious to see his beloved sister in safety, came to solicit an audience. He was kindly received by the prelate, who listened with earnest attention to the details of the Lady de Roussillon's affairs, and warmly approved of her intention of retiring to a monastery until such times as a suitable establishment could be procured her, promising at the same time to do all in his power to recover her possessions from the spoilers. He went in person to conduct her to the gate of the convent of Saint Clare, which she had chosen for her retreat, and recommended the Superior to treat her with the respect and attention due to her misfortunes, her virtues, and her rank.

In the course of the following week, a troop of eight hundred men, chosen from amongst the vassals of the bishop, set out in good order for the Castle of Roussillon, under the command of a nobleman of distinction, and guided by Mathurin: they at once besieged the fortress, and speedily recovered it from the Huguenots. Vaillac and his son were still detained by the events of the war at Figeac, which place they had taken by treachery. Ebrard de St. Sulpice, who proved himself in all things worthy of his high reputation, scrupulously fulfilled his promise, and reinstated the young countess in all her rights and privileges.

The viscount, furious to see his hopes so utterly blighted, haughtily claimed the guardianship of Esperie, threatening the bishop, in case he refused to give her up, that he would besiege him in the city of Cahors with all the strength of the Protestant army. The only answer he received was, that his ill-treatment of his niece, still more than his apostacy, rendered him unworthy of the office of guardian to which the ties of blood entitled him, and that the Countess de Roussillon should remain under the protection of the Church until such time as it pleased her to make choice of a husband. Vaillac foamed with rage on receiving this despatch; many were the efforts he made to recover Roussillon and to take the Castle of Mercuès,[22] which belonged to the bishop; but he failed in all his attempts, and the only result was to make his weakness the more manifest.

Meanwhile the prelate was earnestly intent on procuring a fitting establishment for his ward, and in turn proposed for her acceptance the noblest knights of his earldom: first of all was the Lord D'Armagnac, already distinguished by his exploits in the previous wars; then the Chevalier de Folmont, a young nobleman of great province; and finally the Viscount de Sessac, the same whose homage he had declined. But Esperie begged to remain free, at least for some time longer.

She found herself so happy in that peaceful retreat, amongst those holy women whose whole study was to save their souls and please God, that she felt totally averse to mingle again in the tumult of the world. Sister Angelica, who was a friendless orphan, remained with her;

and her maid Jeanneton had also joined her. Father Alphonse, who had been appointed pastor of St. Urcisse, came frequently to visit her, encouraging her onward in the path of virtue both by precept and example. The page Jehan had been amply rewarded for his services, and had also received an appointment in the bishop's household. Mathurin, too, enriched by many valuable presents, was enabled to live comfortably at home with his aged parent. All the domestics of the family were well repaid for their fidelity; the poor on the estates of Roussillon munificently assisted, and the vassals were remitted a share of their taxes and arrears, so that the name of the Countess Esperie was every where loved and blessed.

For herself she enjoyed in peace the delight of doing good; the remembrance of her sufferings was effaced, as it were, from her memory, or seemed now like a vanished dream. It was only the loss of her mother that now weighed heavy on her heart, but even that sorrow was lightened by the sweet hope of meeting her again in a happier world. Mistress of her fortune as of her actions, her company sought after on account of her gentle virtues still more than her birth or beauty by the best and noblest of Cahors, yet Esperie had no wish to re-enter the world. She kindly and affably received all who came to visit her, and seemed grateful for their attention; but when she left the parlour and returned to her cell, she rejoiced to find herself once more alone with her God.

Though in no way bound by the severe rule of St. Clare, yet she took pleasure in practising some of its austerities; she went to the choir with the nuns, sang with them the divine offices, took part in their labours, and in their recreation, which was generally in the garden, where flowers and shrubs grew in rich profusion; then, when the new priest of St. Urcisse came to her with a grave and anxious look, saying:

"Daughter! one of my parishioners is in extreme want—a member of Jesus Christ is suffering from cold and nakedness"—she ran to her cell, and gladly brought thence wherewith to relieve the distress whose recital had touched her heart.

Days, months, and even years rolled away in that peaceful manner, with an unbroken succession of good works.

Meantime the public mind was occupied by the death of Charles the Ninth, the civil war, the formation of the League, the estates of Blois, the Edicts of Poitiers, and the treaty of Nerac, and the noise of these events died away at the convent-gate, like the angry waves on the sea-shore. To love God and be useful to her neighbour, to strengthen her mind and make herself agreeable to her companions, were the sole occupations of Esperie.

She was then twenty-two years old, and her beauty had matured and ripened in the calm of her beloved retreat. She was no longer the slight, frail-looking girl with the joyous smile, but a tall and finely-formed woman, with a mild, and sweet countenance, yet majestic in her air and bearing, as became the daughter—the sole representative of an illustrious house. It was no longer the tender bud just peeping through the leaves, but a rose in all its mature loveliness. When on rare occasions she appeared in public with the Baroness de Vardes, the sister of Ebrard de St. Sulpice, the eyes of the knights were fixed upon her with intense admiration, and all the noble matrons who knew her misfortunes and her virtues, desired of all things to have her enter their family.

Meanwhile Father Alphonse led his usual life of self-denial and active charity; under his watchful care the parish of St. Urcisse, then as now the poorest in the city, assumed a more cheering aspect. In all that wretched quarter of the Badernes, a labyrinth of narrow and endless streets, and dirty, ruinous-looking houses, not a poor person had he left unvisited, not a child uninstructed in the mild and salutary laws of the Gospel, nor a workman for whom he had not at one time or another procured employment. Peace and concord reigned in every family, for he reconciled all their differences; consequently, he was regarded by his parishioners as a tender father. His presence diffused joy amongst them, and his least word was welcomed as a favor.

Every thing appeared to go on as he could have wished, for earthly ambition had never once disturbed his heart; nevertheless, sadness was the habitual expression of his features, and his discourse was always tinged with melancholy. The brutal excesses of both parties, and the fury of the civil war, afflicted him exceedingly; or might be that a soul of such angelic purity could find no rest away from its native heaven.

Esperie, who loved him as a sister, though never suspecting that he was indeed her brother, never failed to second him in his charitable undertakings, not only by pouring out her wealth in abundance, but also by her pious exhortations and active benevolence. She visited in person all those poor families whom the priest mentioned as the most deserving of interest, bestowing upon them together with the money which relieved their corporal necessities, those consolations which soothe the wounded heart.

One evening, as followed by Jeanneton, she went gaily forth from a ruinous building where she had left baby-clothes with a poor woman who had been delivered of a child on the previous night, her attendant pointed out a man of suspicious appearance who seemed to follow them through that labyrinth of blind alleys and winding streets through which their course lay.

"It is a stranger who has lost his way in the Badernes," said the countess to Jeanneton; "we ought to show him the way, I think."

"Only look, my lady," observed the attendant, "he has stopped just before the door of our patient."

"I suppose, then, he must have been looking for the house," was Esperie's only answer.

And without thinking any more about it, they began to climb the three pair of stairs which conducted to the chamber of a sick woman whom they visited once a week.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE PROMISE OF MARRIAGE.

The Lady Esperie remained more than a quarter of an hour with old Margaret, and at her departure she promised to return soon. On reaching the street she and her attendant again observed the stranger, standing in the identical place where they had first seen him.

"That man is surely watching us," said Jeanneton in a low whisper.

"He may stand in need of assistance," said Esperie, "but how could I bring myself to offer it to him?"

"Why, his clothes are very good, though somewhat dusty," replied Jeanneton, "he has no appearunce of being a beggar."

"In that case, we have nothing to do with him," said the lady, and hastening onward, they very soon turned into a street called New street, (*rue Neuve*), but the stranger never lost sight of them for a moment, and followed them like their shadow.

"Assuredly, I have seen that gloomy looking face before," said Jeanneton, who could not refrain from looking behind once in a while.

"Simple girl that you are," returned the countess with a laugh, "you would fain create a mystery from this chance meeting, and because the man happens to go the same way that we do, you would have us believe that his intentions are bad?—Now, suppose it were so, what have we to fear?"

They had just reached the church of St. Urcisse, and its bells were inviting the faithful to join in some pious exercise: "Let us go in," said Esperie, "we shall have time enough to return to the convent before night."

So they entered the church, but when Jeanneton turned to offer the holy water to her mistress, there stood the same man who had so long dogged their steps leaning against a pillar in the nave.

Meanwhile the church was filled with the music of praise and thanksgiving, and when it ceased, the priest ascended the pulpit and with all his peculiar sweetness of tone, and power of persuasion, he exhorted the people to the love of labour, to the practice of all good works, and chiefly to mutual love, repeating several times these words of the beloved Apostle: *My little children, love one another.*

When he had finished, the crowd silently and decorously dispersed, but Esperie remained some time longer in prayer. Her attendant, no longer perceiving the stranger, was also engaged in her devotions, and the night was already falling when she whispered to her lady that it was full time to leave the church. Esperie hastily arose, somewhat confused for having delayed so long, and drawing her veil around her face, she set out with her attendant for the convent.

The city of Cahors, even in our days badly lighted, was then in complete darkness during the night; and unless the steps of the pedestrian were guided by the rays of the moon, it was next to impossible to find out the way without a lantern. The twilight, however, was still lingering in the air when the countess and her maid left the church.

They were walking on as fast as their feet could go, when three men, placed in ambush at the corner of a street, rushed out upon them, grasped the two in their sinewy arms, and endeavoured to stifle their cries by gagging them.

"Silence, as you value your life!" said one, whom Jeanneton instantly recognized as the same who had followed them from place to place.

"What want you of me?" demanded Esperie, in a stifled voice.

"You shall know that hereafter!" replied the tall cavalier, who kept his face carefully concealed, and seemed to exercise authority over the others.

That voice made the countess shudder.

"Forward!" said the knight, "let us get our horses at once."

"To the rescue!" cried a loud voice, and instantly a man clad in black approached the lady.

"Silence, or thou art a dead man!" exclaimed the knight, and, suiting the action to the word, he drew his sword and rushed towards him.

"To the rescue!" cried the unknown in a still louder voice, seizing as with a hand of iron the arm of his assailant.

Several windows opened, and on the thresholds of doors were seen men bearing flaming torches, crying out, "Watch! watch!"

"We have missed our aim," said the sinister looking leader, "let us escape while yet we can, for here come the soldiers."

"Wo to thee, unlucky priest!" cried the tall knight, as he recognized Father Alphonse, "this is the second time that thou hast thwarted my designs,—but all is not over yet between us—mark that!" And so saying, he hastened away, with his companions or followers, or whatever they might have been.

"What! it is you, father—you?" cried many of the people who had now gathered around.

"You are always at hand when danger threatens me!" said Esperie, her voice almost choked with the excess of her emotion.

"And who has so good a right to watch over you?" returned the priest, for a moment forgetting his secret—"Did I not promise your dying mother that I would do so?" he immediately added.

He had seen Esperie leave the church in the dusk, and had followed her at a distance, through an instinctive impulse for which he himself could not have accounted.

"For the future, you must be more prudent!" he mildly observed, as accompanied by some of the men who had obeyed his call, he conducted her to the gate of the monastery.

Next day the Lady Esperie was summoned to the parlour to receive the bishop, who, having heard of her narrow escape, came in person to offer his congratulations. Esperie looked pale and care-worn. "My God!" she sadly exclaimed, "what have I done to my uncle De Vaillac that he should so persecute me?"

"It is not that he hates you," replied Ebrard, "but that he loves your fortune. I have given the necessary orders to secure you against any future attempts of his, but after all the very best means of defeating his plans would be to make your decision in favour of some one of your suitors."

Esperie cast down her eyes. "Only be good enough to hear me," resumed the prelate, "for it is not to a mere girl I address myself, but to a rational woman already tried by misfortune,—to the Countess de Roussillon. You stand in need of a husband to protect you, to defend your rights, and to preserve your domains in a Catholic family. You have hitherto refused every one who aspired to your hand; the Sire de Castelnande has also proposed for you—he is a man of mature age, of known courage, and acknowledged virtue; let me at least introduce him to you."

"Well! I will receive him?" said Esperie, with a slight motion of impatience.

"My child," replied the bishop in a mild and serious tone, "far be it from me to coerce your will in an affair of so great importance."

Esperie remained a few minutes in silent thought, with her head bowed down. "My lord!" she at length said, in a firm tone, as though she had already made her decision, "My lord! to-morrow I will see the Sire de Castelnande, and in eight days you shall have my answer."

It was then agreed that the Baroness de Vardes should introduce the new candidate for Esperie's favour.

Guy de Castelnande was about forty years of age, in figure about the middle size, and with a fresh and open countenance, although the hard trade of war had bleached his hair and furrowed his brow with untimely wrinkles. His manner was rather abrupt and his voice high and imperious, but all his actions revealed a kind and generous heart, and his soul was the seat of every noble sentiment. The Lady de Roussillon quickly discovered the many valuable qualities of his mind and heart, and she therefore decided on accepting his proposal.

The next day was a joyous one in the convent. Sister Angelica, the novice of Leyme, was to make her profession in the order of St. Clare, and Esperie was to act as her sponsor.

The young orphan was radiant with a holy joy, and when she raised her large black eyes to heaven they were filled with tears of gratitude and happiness.

"How happy she is!" sighed Esperie to herself, "thus to love God with her whole heart, and be at liberty to give herself to him without reserve! Alas! why am not I, too, a poor girl without name or fortune, free to dispose of myself as I pleased!"

Yet she felt no more vocation for the austere life of the nuns whose virtues she so much admired than she did for the titles and duties of the Countess de Castelnande; her mind was full of a far different idea, a sanguine dream—a confused and shadowy notion which she could scarcely define, though it mastered every other.

The eight days had glided by, and Esperie had spent them in prayers and tears. She would fain have consulted Father Alphonse, but he was sick.

On the appointed day, the bishop came again. "My child, have you yet come to a decision?" he kindly inquired.

I will marry the Count de Castelnande," she replied, "but I must first have three months to prepare for entering the state of matrimony, and to consider myself before God."

"You have been heretofore so fastidious in your choice," said the bishop with a gentle smile, "that he has been looking for your answer with fear and trembling."

"If that be so, I trust your lordship will make him acquainted with my decision," and Esperie sighed as she spoke—"it is so sweet to make others happy."

"And now I shall bid you farewell," said the bishop, "as I leave here next week."

"What! surely your lordship is not about to leave us?"

"The affairs of my diocese require my presence at the Court of Rome, but I shall be here again in time to bless your nuptials."

He then saluted the young countess with that graceful dignity which became his rank and character, and withdrew, well pleased with the result of his visit, for he well knew that the Count de Castelnande was a man of unblemished honour, and that Esperie could not have made a better choice.

"It is all over, then!" exclaimed Esperie when she found herself once more alone, "for my plighted word is already given." And falling on a seat near her, she wept long and bitterly.

How many a tumultuous feeling throbbed in that young heart!—What regret, what dark forebodings was it that so saddened her very soul?—The truth was, though Lady de Roussillon scarcely understood the nature of her own feelings, that she bewailed the approaching loss of her freedom, or rather the only freedom she desired, that of consecrating her life and fortune to the service of the wretched and afflicted.

The bishop departed; and soon after, Father Alphonse, who was beginning to recover from a serious illness, came to see his young sister.

Esperie had anxiously looked forward to this visit. She related all that had passed, the entreaties of the bishop, the promise she had given, her own unaccountable reluctance to contract marriage, all, even her visionary fancies and the marvellous impulse which seemed impelling her to another state of life. The priest heard her with attention, raising his eyes to heaven from time to time as though seeking inspiration from above.

"My child," said he at length, "the wisdom of man is exceedingly limitted, and his foresight often at fault; I shall come again to see you in a few days." He explained himself no farther, and yet Esperie felt her mind as it were relieved, so great was her confidence in him.

The count requested to see her in the parlour, and she consented with all her native grace. He was at once respectful and lover-like in his demeanour, while Esperie was to him, as to every one else, gentle and unaffected.

On the 28th of May, Father Alphonse called again at the convent, and he was more pensive even than usual. The Baroness de Vardes and the count's sister were in the parlour, and the conversation was chiefly confined to the preparations for the wedding. The priest took but little part in what was going on, and soon became entirely absorbed in his own reflections.

Esperie, who watched him closely, failed not to observe that his eyes were lovingly fixed on a picture which hung opposite, it was that of Jesus in the hands of the soldiers. The features of the holy priest were lit up with celestial joy, and it was easy to fancy a circle of glory around his head; then he cast his eyes on her whom next to his God he loved, and instantly those eyes were filled with tears.

The two ladies took their leave, without having seen, or remarked any thing uncommon. "Father! what is the matter with you?" inquired Esperie with affectionate earnestness when they were left alone together.

He looked at her with that mournful smile, which was the usual expression of his countenance; for it might be said of him, as of Our divine Lord that he was often seen to weep but never to laugh; yet never had Esperie seen on his face such a strange mixture of joy and sorrow.

"Esperie, my sister!" said he, and it was the first time he had ever thus addressed her, "should we meet no more in this world, God, in his goodness, will re-unite us in his divine love. Have entire confidence in Him ; consecrate your life to serve Him in his suffering members, and therein will you find the consolation, the happiness which you cannot otherwise obtain."

However strange and mysterious were these words, Esperie ventured not to ask an explanation ; and she stood leaning against the grating of the parlour, silent and melancholy.

"Adieu!" said the priest as he arose from his seat.

"Father! when shall I see you again?" exclaimed Esperie as though suddenly roused by the sound of his voice.

He came back, reached out his hand through the bars and took hers for a moment, raised his eyes to heaven, and withdrew without uttering a word.

CHAPTER XV.

THE SIEGE.

When Catherine de Medicis concluded the marriage of her son with the daughter of Henry of Navarre, Quercy formed a part of the dowry settled on that princess. Nevertheless the inhabitants of Cahors constantly refused to submit to a heretic prince, and, notwithstanding all the estimable qualities of the king of Navarre, the gates of the city and the hearts of the citizens were alike closed against him.

Several years had passed away, and still the kingdom was torn and divided by civil war. Doubtless the edict of Poitiers, confirmed as it was by the treaty of Nerac, would have given peace to the country, had Henry III. seen it put into execution, but giving up the affairs of the government into inefficient and impotent hands, he plunged into a life of sensual indulgence, and the contending parties soon resumed their arms.

The city of Montauban had become a sort of republic, and was made the centre of the operations of the Huguenots. The king of Navarre set out from there with a well-disciplined and experienced force, and moved, by forced marches, on Cahors, under whose walls he encamped on the night of the 29th May, 1580.

The Lady Esperie, sad and pensive, after her conversation with Father Alphonse, and lost in her endeavours to fathom the meaning of his words, had not been able to obtain a moment's sleep. Tired and feverish, she arose from her couch, threw on a dressing-gown, and was kneeling in prayer, when a sudden explosion made her start up in alarm. It was the first gate of the new bridge which the Navarrese had blown up (23). The citizens, aroused by the shock, hastily took up arms, but the Baron de Salignac, Captain St. Martin, the Viscount de Gourdon, Roquelaure, Terride, and de Vaillac were already on the bridge. Some of the guard they flung into the river, others they hewed down in an instant, and applying a petard to the second gate, it too gave way, and the invaders penetrated into the city.

The brave Vezins, at the head of the garrison, disputes the ground inch by inch, but his soldiers, becoming terrified by the savage fury of the Huguenots, could with difficulty be kept from flying. The citizens fly to their assistance, led on by the Count de Castelnande, calm and terrible under his dazzling armour. The combat rages on every side. The citizens form barricades, and desperately defend themselves and their city; Salignac, Roquelaure, and St. Martin are dangerously wounded, and Guy de Castelnande ably sustained his high reputation for valor. But the King of Navarre is at the head of the assailants; his ardent courage animates them, while his calm judgment guides and restrains, and ere the day closed he forced the first barricade, took possession of the Guildhall, and established his quarters therein.

Meanwhile Esperie, having soon learned from a lay-brother the cause of the tumult, had hastened to join the terrified nuns in the choir.

There they all passed the greater part of the day, weeping and praying, and anxiously questioning the few stragglers who came to bring them news.

Towards evening a loud knocking shook the gate, and the Count de Castelnande rushed into the parlour, covered with blood and dust.

"Countess," said he to Esperie, who ran to meet him, "I no longer consider you safe here, for should these Huguenots take the city, the monasteries will be their first prey. You are my bethrothed wife; my sister's house will afford you a fitting asylum,—let me conduct you there!"

Esperie's eyes filled with tears of regret; but, well knowing that the Count had not a moment to lose, she called Jeanneton, took a hasty leave of the nuns, and followed her protector.

Guy walked rapidly on, supporting the trembling frame of Esperie, yet he spoke not a word, and appeared sad and dejected; numerous patrols crossed in every direction, and the combat was going on in almost every street between straggling parties on either side; the doors were all closed, and the inhabitants sunk in a state of stupefaction.

"Lady, this is your asylum," said the Count a last, when, having reached the place St Bartholomew, he stopped before a large and handsome edifice, and presenting his hand, he led her up the stairs, and seating her in the drawing-room, he summoned his sister.

"To your care," said he, "I confide what I love best on earth—see that you protect and cherish her, whatever may happen."

"Whither are you going my Lord," exclaimed Esperie anxiously, for she was deeply touched by the Count's manner as he spoke these words.

"Where duty calls me—to *death* perhaps," he added with a sigh, and without another word he darted to the gate.

"Surely these Huguenot dogs cannot long hold out against our brave soldiers!" observed Mademoiselle, de Castelnande, with an air of contempt.

"Let us hope so," replied Esperie, mournfully—"and yet the King of Navarre is at their head."

"And my brother—your affianced, commands our loyal Catholics," rejoined the other, proudly.

"May God watch over them and us," was the fervent ejaculation of the young Countess, and she at once withdrew to the apartments destined for her use.

Meantime, the Count de Castelnande sustained the sinking courage of the citizens, and caused solid barricades to be raised in the very face of the enemy. This task employed the entire night, and on the morrow the besiegers found their progress barred by this new defence. The struggle was then renewed and long sustained without any marked success on either side. A terrible fire proceeding from the college of Pellegrie, defended barricades, and rained death on the assailants. From the windows stones were incessantly hurled on the Huguenots; the King himself narrowly escaped destruction, but his courage and perseverance were proof against all danger

On the third day, his troops took possession of the convent of the Chartreux, and on the following day the barricade of Pellegrie was carried and the college taken. Then the battle assumed a tenfold fury; the warriors on both sides fought with desperation, and the king of Navarre performed prodigies of valor. In vain did his officers beseech him to take care of his life, for he was always seen where the danger was most imminent. On the other side he had adversaries of equal bravery in the gallant Vezins, Dadin de Hanteserre, and Guy de Castelnande.

Terror pervaded all the city; women, children, and old men barricaded themselves in the houses; some ran to the churches, hoping to find before the altars a refuge from the fury of the Huguenots.

Mademoiselle de Castelnande had lost her arrogant security, for the count had never returned from the moment that he brought Esperie. On the third day, his squire appeared, sad and downcast, at the gate, and was followed by two soldiers bearing on a hand-barrow the body of Guy, who had fallen by the hand of the king of Navarre.

Esperie could not but mourn the death of him who was soon to have been her husband, and who died as a valiant Catholic leader should—she wept for some time, until her heart was somewhat relieved, and then she aroused herself from her sorrow, to attend to his bereaved sister, who seemed entirely overcome by this dread stroke. Calm in her submission to the will of God, Esperie devoted her whole attention to the disconsolate mourner, though the anticipation of the misfortunes impending over the city, and her renewed remembrance of the brutality of the Huguenots, filled her whole soul with sadness. One anxious thought predominated over all others;—what had become of Father Alphonse in these days of calamity and mourning? She had written to inform him that she had quitted the convent, but had received no answer. The holy priest never quitted the defenders of the city for a single moment, being desirous of imparting to the dying the consolations of religion.

Meanwhile further resistance became impossible; the count was dead, De Hauteserre made prisoner by the Viscount de Gourdon, and Vezins, dangerously wounded, had retired by the old bridge. Then commenced the most fearful butchery which the Protestant chiefs either would not or could not prevent.[24] The entire city was given up to pillage—the inmates of the monasteries were burned alive on the desecrated altars; women, children, and old men, all were cut down—massacred. The blood flowed in streams through the streets, and reddened the waters of the Lot; hordes of soldiers, like so many wild beasts, roamed at will through the city, dealing every where death and destruction. One of these bands of ruffians took the way to the convent of St. Clare; at their head was a man of tall stature, who, whilst the soldiers were wreaking their accustomed cruelties on the hapless nuns, had searched every hole and corner of the convent for a victim who was not to be found; and when, after three hours of carousal and pillage, his troop, drunk with blood and wine, set fire to the building, he went forth exasperated, as a man might be who had been disappointed in his plans, or rather, as a tiger who had missed his prey. He was staggering along, breathless and irresolute, when at the turn of a corner he was joined by another knight, taller and still fiercer than himself. Accosting each other they exchanged some words in a low voice.

The first of these was Ralph de Vaillac, and the other the viscount his father.

"Where can he have concealed her?" said the younger.

"Vengeance!" cried the father, and taking the command of the troop, he instantly led the way to the church of St. Urcisse.

From the dawn of that day of blood, that church had been the asylum of a crowd consisting of trembling nuns, frail old men, terrified women and children. The priest was in their midst, sad but calm, consoling some, and encouraging others to have confidence in God. The doors were carefully closed and strongly barricaded; one alone had been left partially open, and it was a low, narrow door which led from the sacristy to the sepulchral vaults.

"If the church is taken, it is there that the people must be concealed," said Father Alphonse to his young curate, "it may be that even the Huguenots will respect the asylum of the dead, the resting-place of their fathers."

And, robed in his priestly attire, he continued his exhortations; his voice was firm, and his eyes were raised to heaven, that heaven whose delights he painted in the tone and language of inspiration. All hearts were moved, all ears attentive, when the principal door was assailed by the blows of an axe.

The priest suddenly stopped, but he showed no symptom of fear. "Quick—quick—to the vaults!" he cried in a suppressed voice; "the first Christians took refuge in the catacombs—my brother!" he added, addressing the curate, "my brother! lead the people to the vaults."

"Will not you show us the way?" inquired the young priest.

"Not so, for if the Huguenots found no victim whereon to glut their fury—above all, if they found not the pastor, they would speedily discover the flock—brother! my hour is come!"

The curate pressed his hand in mournful silence, and looking back at him for the last time on earth, he followed the terrified fugitives who rushed tumultuously into the dark abyss.

Meanwhile, the axes had done their work, and the principal door flew in pieces, whereupon the furious soldiery without, made a rush into the church, roaring and howling with savage ferocity. The priest was on his knees before the crucifix; an ardent prayer, escaped his parched lips, and a few tears trickled from his eyes, but his brow was calm and unruffled as ever.

"Seize that man, and burn him on the altar by a slow fire, till he discovers where he has put his treasures," shouted a hoarse voice.

Two soldiers darted forward to execute the command, whilst the others rushed to lay hold of the gold and silver candlesticks. The priest did but turn towards the soldiers and on sight of his calm, pale face they drew back.

"What restrains you?" cried the viscount, advancing with his sword drawn in a menacing attitude.

One of the two soldiers stood in front of Father Alphonse so as to shield him from assault. "My lord!" cried his companion, "one day my comrade and I had been left for dead on the high road; and this priest chancing to pass that way, placed us on his mule, brought us to his house, took care of us until we were perfectly recovered and then gave us the means of returning home; I beg his life as our share of the booty."

"It is but just," exclaimed several voices, for the troop, having already satiated their thirst for carnage at the convent of St. Clare.

"Obey, or you shall learn to know me!" cried De Vaillac.

Not a word was answered, but the soldier remained motionless in front of the priest.

"Poltroons!" shouted the furious viscount, whereupon a murmur of discontent ran through the band.

"Woe to all who refuse to obey me!" roared the leader still more furiously, and he drew nearer to the priest.

"My friends!" said the latter, "a thousand thanks for your generous protection;—but, I pray you, leave me to my fate, for my hour is already come!"

"Never! never! was the only answer.

"Traitor!" howled the viscount, foaming with rage; and beating down with the back of his sword, the up-raised arm of the soldier, he plunged it to the hilt into the body of the holy priest.

"My God, forgive them, for they know not what they do!" he murmured in a failing tone, and fell back on the steps of the altar.

"Priest! I told you we should meet again," vociferated his murderer.

But the tired soldiers still murmurred, being indignant for his treatment of their comrade; they were urged on and excited by the protectors of the priest, and the whole band quitted the church angry and discontented.

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In the dead of the night while darkness shrouded the earth, the rain fell in torrents, and victor and vanquished were for the time sunk in sleep, the deep sleep that followed long watching and excessive sufferings on the one side, and the unbounded gratification of brute passion on the other, when two females came forth closely veiled from a house in the Place St. Bartholomew, which seemed to have been preserved by a miracle amid the smoking ruins which surrounded it. They were accompanied by a man fully armed and equipped, who carried a dark lantern. The three advanced with the utmost caution through the deserted streets to the church of St. Urcisse.

At sight of the shattered doors, a groan escaped from the youngest of the two females, and she darted into the church. The most profound darkness reigned within, and all would have been death-like silence, but for a sort of low, wailing sound, which seemed to issue from the interior of the building. Esperie, for she it was, turned in the direction of the sound, and perceived a light through the chinks of a door which easily gave way beneath her hand. She descended some steps and entered a small subterraneous chapel behind the choir dedicated to St. Urcisse, Jeanneton and Mathurin followed close behind their lady.

A touching spectacle awaited their eyes. Extended at the base of the holy bishop's statue, with his head laid on a velvet cushion, and robed in his white linen alb, with his stole and other priestly ornaments. Father Alphonse seemed as though in a peaceful slumber; his brow calm and serene; his lips slightly parted, as if smiling; his whole face bearing the stamp of peace and joy; his hands were crossed on his bosom, and held the image of Our Lord Jesus Christ; and his limbs were stretched out in decent repose, so naturally that one could scarcely believe him dead. Near the body sat an aged woman and a young priest who was singing a psalm in an under tone.

Esperie looked on for a while in mournful silence, then letting her head fall on her chest, and folding her hands across on her bosom, she said: "He was the only friend that remained to me on earth. The will of God be done!"

"How did he die?" inquired Jeanneton, with tears in her eyes.

"The victim of charity," replied the priest. "He might easily have escaped from the vengeful hatred of De Vaillac; but whilst his parishioners got away safe, he remained to confront the heretics so as to keep them from following, by presenting a victim for their fury.

"Yet the monsters shrank not from such a crime!" exclaimed Mathurin.

"Yes, the soldiers would not have harmed him," returned the priest, "but their chief stabbed him with his own hand."

"The Viscount de Vaillac—was it he?" said Esperie, in a choking voice.

"The very man," murmured old Ursule, bursting into tears.

"The infamous wretch!" said Mathurin.

"My poor dear master!" sighed the old woman—"The best of men!"

"A learned and pious priest!" ejaculated the curate.

"A saint!" cried Jeanneton, "if ever there was one!"

"An angel of whom the earth was not worthy!" added Mathurin.

"Oh holy martyr! pray for us, in that heaven where thou now art!" said the Lady Esperie fervently, as she fell on her knees, and all present followed her example.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE PLAGUE.

Several months had rolled away. Ebrard de St. Sulpice, penetrated with sorrow for the evils which had befallen his good city of Cahors during his absence, had made use of all his talents and of all his influence at court, to deliver his domains from their fearful bondage. A new treaty of peace, owing in a great measure to his zeal and abilities, had restored Cahors to the Catholics; and the prelate, on his return to his diocese, devoted all his energies to repair the fatal effects of the war very soon; the fallen houses arose from their ruins, fairer and better proportioned than ever; the monasteries were again filled with those of their former inmates who had escaped the late massacre, and their numbers re-inforced by new postulents, the children were again collected in the schools, workmen at their employment, the farmer rejoiced in the prospect of an abundant harvest, and hope was springing up in every heart, when a fearful pestilence broke out in that unhappy city.

In the month of May, of the following year, a master-mason, who, having a wife and family, had been employed on that account by the prelate to rebuild some houses for the working classes, went one day to the episcopal palace to submit his plans for inspection. A little before this man had harbored in his house a sick soldier. While walking along, he suddenly felt an extreme weakness in his limbs, together with a strange sensation never felt before. He conversed some time with the prelate, although he felt himself in a high fever, the words died away on his lips, his face was inflamed, and his eyes starting from their sockets. Ebrard, who noticed this, had him taken home, and sent his own physician to visit him. Three days after, the poor man sank under his unknown malady, and his death was quickly followed by that of his wife and children. The physician then began to suspect the nature of the evil, but he shrank from disclosing his suspicions.

Another family was attacked in a similar way; the citizens became alarmed, and terror overspread the city. The bishop assembled the physicians, and urged them to explain themselves candidly, but their opinion was not at all unanimous, some thought that it was but a slight fever having its origin perhaps in the sufferings of the previous year; whilst others, and particularly him who had attended the mason and his family, maintained that the malady presented all the marks of the plague.

"Whether it be the plague or any other contagious disease," said the prelate, "every exertion must be used to stop its ravages, if it be yet possible."

Then, by the advice of the physicians, he gave strict orders that the effects of those who had died of the disease should be immediately burned, the doors of their houses built up, and those already afflicted to be kept entirely isolated from all others. But it was too late: the fatal infection had been already communicated far and wide: the sick became frightfully numerous; death multiplied his victims, particularly in the district of the Badernes, and St. George's suburbs. The physicians ordered that the bells should ring incessantly, and that large fires of straw should be kept constantly burning in the streets, in order to dispel the foul air, but all was in vain. The rich fled the city to take refuge on their estates in the country, and terror was at its height.

Ebrard de St. Sulpice, afflicted but not discouraged, displayed all the energy of his character. Far from yielding to the solicitations of his family and friends, who urged him to retire to his castle of Mercuès, in order to preserve a life so precious to all, he gave an example of the greatest devotion. Constantly braving death without either ostentation or fear, he himself went about imparting comfort and consolation, and showing himself wherever he could be of service; but vain were all his efforts, for even his charity could not provide for all. The hospitals were already full to overflowing, and every day the plague became more destructive.

Every morning the prelate examined the sanitary reports of the previous day and night; it was in his own palace that the Board of Health assembled, and he frequently assisted in person at their meetings. On the 20th of June, beds were wanting in the hospitals; several members of the religious communities and also some of the physicians were already numbered amongst the victims. Ebrard, overwhelmed with sorrow, withdrew into his oratory, and prayed there in solitude for a little while; he then set out on foot, attended by a single domestic.

The sky was cloudless and serene, and the sun rose high and bright over Mount St. Cyr; but the streets were deserted, the doors all carefully closed, and pale dismay was painted on the faces of the few inhabitants who appeared at the windows. The young bishop traversed the bridge Notre-dame and took his way to the suburbs. Passing near St. George's fountain, he perceived several corpses covered with livid spots, the remains of wretches who, burning with the rage of the fever, had dragged themselves there, hoping to quench their torturing thirst, but death had not left them time. Ebrard regarded them with a look of pity, and then hastened on his way. After a walk of about ten minutes, he knocked at the door of a small castellated mansion situated at the foot of a verdant hill, covered with large boxwood trees, ancient oaks, elms, and cornels. An armed man came to reconnoitre through a loophole, and called out to know who came, but, on seeing the bishop, he quickly opened the gate, and bowed to the very ground.

"Mathurin!" said the bishop, "is your lady to be seen?"

"The countess is in her oratory, but I will go and announce to her your lordship's arrival."

The prelate took a seat in a small parlour of unpretending appearance, piously decorated with images of the saints and texts of Scripture. Esperie delayed not a moment; she was attired in black with no other ornament than a small gold cross which hung from her neck. Her face, though radiant with the hue of health, was still sad and pensive.

"You here, my lord!" she exclaimed, as she bent to receive the bishop's blessing.

"How do you find yourself in this miniature castle?" inquired the prelate kindly.

"You have commanded me to come here with a view to escape the contagion by cutting off all communication with the people without, and not to enter the city, and I have obeyed your lordship."

"And neither yourself nor any of your people has been yet attacked?"

"None, my lord."

"I am rejoiced to hear it," said the bishop hesitatingly, as though about to broach some decision already made in his own mind.

"Has the plague at all subsided in Cahors?" demanded Esperie. "When shall I be permitted again to enter?"

"Alas!" replied the prelate in a sorrowful tone, "the pestilence rages more furiously than ever, so that rich and poor are now equally its victims. The physicians are no longer able to visit the sick, nor the grave-diggers to bury the dead—the evil has reached its height."

"And yet I am here in a paradise of rest and peace," said the countess with some bitterness, "I am here without any useful occupation, doing nothing to assist my fellow-creatures; and it is you, my lord,—you—who require this sacrifice of me!"

"Your life is precious to me," returned the bishop, "for are you not my adopted daughter?"

"But is not my soul more precious to you than the life of my body?" she quickly exclaimed. But instantly resuming her usual mildness of look and tone: "I will obey you, my lord, but you know not what this obedience costs me."

"You still persist then in your intention of devoting yourself to the service of the poor?" inquired the bishop.

"My lord, I have already told you, that it is my daily and nightly thought—the most ardent wish of my heart. Long have I been harrassed by doubt and uncertainty, shrinking in dread from the prospect of marriage, while the solitude of the cloister appeared monotonous and irksome, so that I knew not what Heaven demanded of me; but no sooner had I read that letter found for me amongst the papers of Father Alphonse, than I saw clearly through the recesses of my heart. Even as the eyes of the blind man of Jericho were opened by the words of Jesus, so it was with the eyes of my soul. Then it was that I understood my vocation, and heard the voice of God demanding my body and my wealth. Doubt not, my lord, that it is his grace which calls me; and, in the words of Father Alphonse, my fortune and my life ought to be consecrated to Him."

"Well!" said Ebrard, "when the plague shall have ceased . . . . ."

"What!" exclaimed the countess, "when the poor are no longer in need of assistance then, I am to go offer my services? Of what use are my riches, if I cannot dispose of them as I wish; or my time and my health, if I cannot use them in the way that suits me, and is most acceptable to God?"

"You fear not the contagion, poor young creature:—but do you know how dreadful it is?—Do you know that the fear of it separates servants from masters and mistresses the kindest and most beloved, children from their parents, and wives from their husbands?—Will you not wait till this terrific danger is passed?"

"My lord! what would you think of a knight who said: "When peace is concluded, I shall embrace the career of arms?"

"As you will, then," replied the bishop." "From this day forward, you shall have your own way. Henceforward you are the servant of the poor, and belong exclusively to the Lord."

"May his holy name be praised for ever and ever!" exclaimed Esperie with pious fervour, and falling on her knees she raised to heaven her brilliant eyes now filled with tears of joy. A celestial smile illumined her features, and her beauty assumed for the moment an angelic character under the strong influence of gratitude and divine love.

The bishop regarded her a moment in silent admiration, then, extending his hand to raise her up, he said with paternal kindness: "Daughter! the moments are precious, let me tell you what remains for me to say."

He then briefly communicated to her the plan he had formed, requesting her candid opinion. It met her warmest approbation, and then the bishop took his leave, both being inspired with renewed hope.

A few hours later, the Lady Esperie quitted her little castle, accompanied by her maid and five or six orphans whom she had kept since the war had deprived them of their parents, and who now prayed to remain with her, and they all directed their course towards the city.

That very evening a large house which was situated near the convent of the Chartreux and belonging to Esperie, was turned into an hospital. It contained seventy-five beds, and was attended by two physicians, two monks from the neighbouring convent, together with some nurses for the sick, and there did the Lady de Roussillon, with her companions, commence her labour of love and mercy. Nothing could exceed the order, the neatness, and the comfort which reigned throughout the establishment, while the most unbounded care and attention was bestowed upon the sick. Nothing could divert the devoted nurses from their task, they saw without shrinking, the livid plague-spots, and the virulent ulcer, nor could the fœtid smell of that horrible disease keep them away a moment from the agonized sufferer. Heaven blessed their efforts, and a great number recovered, through their instrumentality.

Nevertheless, within the first week, three of Esperie's companions fell victims of the plague, but their place was speedily filled up, and more than filled by the arrival of several pious women who hastened to offer their services. Not content with receiving all who presented themselves, Mademoiselle de Roussillon went abroad through the streets, and penetrated into the houses in search of those who might require her aid. By order of the Board of Health, every house stricken with the plague was marked with a red cross, and these doomed dwellings were regarded with horror, people fearing to touch even their outer walls. It was into these abodes of terror that Esperie daily made her way, administering cordials and remedies to the deserted patients, picking up orphans, procuring christian burial for the dead, and all this without the slightest apprehension for herself, without any fear of that death which she saw every where around under its most revolting forms, because she saw it at the same time by the eyes of faith as the certain pledge of salvation.

One evening, overpowered with fatigue, she was returning through the deserted streets to her hospital, accompanied by her faithful follower, when a low murmur attracted her attention—a sound that resembled the plaintive yelping of an animal in pain. Esperie paused and looked around, seeking to discover whence the noise proceeded. It was already too dark to distinguish objects, but on looking upwards, she could discern through a window, a faint, flickering light, like that of an expiring lamp. Just then, the same noise was heard more distinctly, for it was now like a ferocious howling: it might be the rattling in the throat of a man dying with rage.

"There is suffering here," said Esperie, "let us go in." They knocked several times at the door of a large, lonely-looking house, and called aloud, requesting admission. No human being answered their summons, but again was heard the wild, hoarse, despairing cry.

"Let us enter," said Esperie, and she raised the latch. They groped their way through a long corridor in utter darkness; Mademoiselle de Roussillon led the way, and was followed by her trembling attendant.

"Here is the balustrade of the staircase," said Esperie, "let us follow it."

She ascended some steps, when her foot suddenly struck against some object that emitted no sound. Stooping down to ascertain the nature of the obstruction, she found that it was the body of a man lying right across the staircase.

A cry of horror escaped her, and she leaned on Jeanneton scarcely able to support herself; but her charity was not to be overcome, and she resolved to cross the frightful barrier. Having reached the first story, and finding the doors all open they passed from room to room, guided only by the dim light that the night reluctantly shows through her darkness. Their steps re-echoed through the deserted apartments, and so horrible was the utter desolation of the place that Jeanneton pressed closer and closer to her mistress, who felt her own blood chilled with fear, though the hope of doing good still urged her onward.

They at length reached the place whence the light proceeded. It was a vast chamber, at the farther end of which was a bed raised on an estradi. A shattered money-chest, presses lying open and empty, and the furniture lying around in confusion, all denoted a recent robbery. Without pausing to dwell on the sad reflections suggested by that thought, Esperie lit a taper, approached the bed, and saw a body lying there covered with purple spots, hideous and disgusting. A tremor ran through her frame; but surmounting the natural disgust arising from such a sight, she drew still nearer, bent down over the body in order to ascertain whether the life was indeed extinct, and touched with her delicate fingers the stiff, cold corpse, as it seemed to be. Suddenly the figure moved, red, and bloodshot eyes rolled in their sockets, the lips parted, the chest heaved, and a hoarse, guttural voice was heard.

"Is it you, at last, my son?"

Madamoiselle de Roussillon screamed aloud, for she already recognized the voice, whose bare remembrance had often made her shudder. Jeanneton, in extreme alarm, was hastening towards the door, and Esperie could scarcely refrain from following: the horrors of that night, when, watching beside the dead body of her mother, she had first heard that voice threatening and inexorable, all returned to her memory; then she thought of the recent attempt to carry her off, and finally of the death of father Alphonse, the deepest affliction of all.

"Let us fly!" said her attendant, taking her mistress by the hand, and laying hold of the light.

They both darted towards the door, and were hastening from the room, when the sick man uttered a plaintive moan, and Esperie instantly stopped.

"And yet he is a man—a Christian!" she exclaimed.

"Oh! I am dying with thirst," said the voice.

These words reminded Esperie and her maid of the object of their visit, and to the sublime task they had imposed upon themselves. Esperie searched the chamber, and finding some water in a pitcher, she mingled a little with a few drops of an elixir which Jeanneton carried in a bottle, then approached the viscount, raised his hideous head, and made him swallow a few spoonfuls of the drink. It revived him somewhat, so that he was enabled to raise his feeble arm, and extending his dry, cold hand, he laid hold of Esperie's shoulder, and drew her towards him. Esperie shuddered in his grasp, but she made no effort to free herself, for compassion prevailed over fear and disgust.

"So it is not Ralph?" said the sufferer, opening and closing his eyes alternately, as if he sought, yet feared the light. "What is thy name—thou, who shrank not from coming hither, when I was abandoned by all else, even my own son?—And yet," he angrily added, "I must see him—I must speak to him before I die."

"Doubtless he will come," said Esperie, as she tried to disengage herself; for a new fear, that of the presence of the baron at that silent hour, and in a place so deserted, took possession of her very soul; but the viscount held her with convulsive strength.

"No, he will not come—poltroon that he is! —he will not come, the villain! he is too much afraid of the plague. He will leave his father to die like a dog; my body will be flung into the sewer, and that will be the end of all."

"And he gnashed his teeth in impotent rage; his hair stood on end, and his face was frightful to behold.

"Does he know that you are sick and alone here?" inquired Esperie.

"Does he know it!" repeated the husky voice, "it is three days since Rodano set out to inform him, and I have been alone ever since. All my servants abandoned me, after taking every thing of value they could find, the scoundrels.—Curse upon them, and upon myself! I have no strength left, and there is no one to give me even a glass of water."

"I will not desert you, my Lord!" said the heroic girl, "so be composed, I entreat you."

"It seems to me that I have somewhere before seen that angelic countenance," said de Vaillac, looking closely into her face. "Girl! who art thou—speak?"

"The servant of the sick—a poor sister of charity," replied Esperie turning her head aside to avoid discovery.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE INHERITANCE.

When Cahors was restored to the Catholics, de Vaillac and his son had quitted the city with the rest of the Protestant army. The valuable booty which they had taken served to pay off some of the viscount's most troublesome creditors; but his debts were immense, and he soon felt the necessity of making new exertions, for peace being concluded, he had no longer the resource of pillage. In his distress, he remembered that he had a rich old aunt in Cahors, with whom in former times he had been a great favourite. His cupidity over-mastered his fear of the plague which was even then ravaging the city, nay, he even hailed it as an auxiliary that might help him to obtain possession of the expected legacy.

For a while, all succeeded even beyond his hopes; he easily made his way into the city, found the old Lady de Vaillac sick, not indeed of the plague, but having a general debility both of mind and body, arising in the first place from her great age, and perhaps increased by the malignant influence of the pestilential air He made his court to her, and told her that, knowing her to be ill, he had braved the danger of the plague, to come and see her. The old woman believed him, felt all her former affection revive for her brother's son, made a will in his favour, and expired a few hours after.

De Vaillac, exulting in his success, agreed with Ralph that they were immediately to set about enjoying their new wealth. The young man set out in quest of the deeds which were to establish their rights. During his absence the viscount took possession of the house and furniture of the deceased; he went through every corner of the vast building, ransacked closets and cupboards, opened the safe, and smiled with delight on seeing the gold and jewels it contained. But even while he stood gloating over his newly-found treasure, indulging in a thousand ambitious dreams, the plague laid hold of his frame, and being suddenly seized with a violent spasm, he fell powerless on the floor.

On recovering his senses, he found himself lying on the pavement, arose, closed his chest, the darling object of his love, and found strength to regain his bed. He soon after fell asleep, but his slumber was heavy, painful, and restless, being tormented by frightful dreams. At one time he saw himself, as it were, pursued by demons; and at another he beheld his numerous victims glaring upon him, reproaching him with his crimes. Awaking with a violent shiver, he felt himself in a burning heat, with a violent palpitation of the heart, and an extreme faintness of his whole body. He rang for his servants, ordered one to go for a physician, another to set out instantly to summon the baron, and a third to remain by him; then he relapsed into his lethargic slumber.

Far from obeying their master's orders, the rascals availed themselves of the opportunity to lay hold on all the plate, gold, and jewels which they could find; but while dividing the booty, they disputed amongst themselves, snatched up knives, which lay within their reach, and one of them was killed; his was the body that Mademoiselle de Roussillon had found on the staircase.

The other two ruffians hastened to quit the city with their plunder, never troubling themselves about the viscount, whom they looked upon as little better than a dead man. When the latter awoke once more from his long sleep, he rang the bell at first gently, then violently, but no one came. He endeavoured to get out of bed, but found himself utterly unable, and to crown his misery, his first glance around the room, revealed to him the fact that his servants had robbed him.

Then the frightful truth was before him in all its horrors: he saw himself, deserted, plundered, and stricken with the plague that he had wished to carry off his aged relative. He called, and re-called, being terrified at the thoughts of his utter loneliness, but no one heard, or, at least no one answered. Then came the phrenzy of despair; he tore the hair from his head, tossed his arms wildly, and foamed with rage, till, at last, falling faint and exhausted on his bed, he lay there tortured with every mental and bodily pang.

Meanwhile Ralph was enjoying himself in the domains of Vaillac, having little thought of returning to a city whose very air was impregnated with deadly poison. Nevertheless, his continual want of money obliged him to set out for Cahors, as he dared not entrust any one with the precious deeds. Just as he entered the city in disguise, he was met on the bridge by one of his friends, who carried him off to his house, where he was entertaining some two or three young libertines, who made it their boast to laugh at the plague, and to lead a joyous life even if it were to be a short one. Ralph followed their example, quaffed deep draughts to the health of the plague, jested wittily on death and the dying, nor thought of returning to his father till the night was far advanced. He reached the house, tottering on his limbs, his head confused, his tongue thick, and he scarcely conscious of what he was about. The open door, the darkness and the silence, and the disorder every where visible when he did gain the light, gave him no surprise, for he was in no state to reflect on any thing; he mounted the stairs, stumbled over the body of the servant, rose again without knowing what it was that had obstructed his way, and moved almost mechanically towards the door of his father's chamber.

"My lord!" said Esperie, in her sweetest accents, "try to take some repose—it will do you good."

"Ah ha! girl, you want to go like the others," answered Vaillac, and he clutched her still more firmly, "but you, at least, shall not escape me; I want you here, for I cannot remain alone. I am very ill, do you see that?—and that good-for-nothing Ralph who is staying away!——"

"What ails you, father?" interrupted the baron with a stupid laugh, "you called me, did you not?"

"At last," exclaimed the viscount, as dropping Esperie's arm, he endeavoured to sit up, "what were you doing ever since, at Vaillac, you wretch?"

"What is the matter here?" said the baron, whose drunkenness was gradually subsiding, and he began to look around with astonishment on the confusion of the chamber, his father in bed, and the young girl, who had drawn her veil over her face, and modestly retired into a corner.

"The matter is that our rascally servants have pilferred all they could come at, and that your father is dying!"

"Curses light on them! they have robbed us!" exclaimed the baron.

"And your father is dying!" repeated the viscount in a terrible voice.

The young man shuddered. "What is the nature of your malady, father?" said he, as he cast a fearful glance upon his face.

"Come near, boy, and help me to sit up, for I have no longer any strength, and I feel myself choking."

"Father!" said Ralph, without advancing a single step, "I think you had better remain as you are."

"Ha, coward!" roared the viscount, with sudden fury, "are you afraid to touch me?"

Yes, so it was; Ralph who had so often braved death on the battle-field, and was ready at any moment, to do so again; Ralph was afraid of the contagion, now that he found himself face to face with that dread enemy which regarded neither power, nor youth, nor strength, nor courage, and which dealt on its victims the most hideous destruction.

"Father!" said he, with a confused air "I see you are not alone,—you have some one to attend to you, and I am expected elsewhere on business of the utmost importance."

"Scoundrel, it is false!" returned the viscount, more and more enraged. Then suddenly calming down a little, he added: "Ralph, my son, I tell thee again that, I am dying: so come here, for the moments are precious, and I have much to say to thee."

And, lowering his voice, so as not to be heard by the young girls: "There, under my head—the key of the safe—do you understand?"

The baron made one step forward; cupidity, filial love, and the fear of the plague, all struggled within him, and he stopped short.

"Oh!—I am dying!" cried the viscount, who was seized at the moment by a violent pang.

"I go to fetch a physician," said the young man, darting towards the door.

"No—no—it is useless—he would not be here in time, and besides I am now somewhat better—come hither, my son, till I embrace thee for the last time—and this key—come here, I say."

The baron remained motionless, holding the half-open door in his hand, and neither daring to fly, nor to return.

"I am burning—the fire of hell consumes me—water—oh, water ——."

Ralph stirred not, but Esperie, filling the cup, presented it to the dying man, who swallowed it at a draught.

"Ralph,—my son," he again cried.

The baron who had moved some steps further away, again stopped, dismayed and hesitating.

"Ah! the monster!" growled the old man, raising himself up by a desperate effort,—"the infamous wretch!—ungrateful and perfidious son, may the curse of thy dying father follow thee wheresoever thou goest, and may it fall on thee and thy posterity!"

"Oh! speak not thus," cried the young girl, "spare him, my lord, spare your only son!"

In her rapid movement towards the bed, her veil fell back, and her face was fully seen—that face, radiant with purity and the light of divine charity.

"Esperie—my niece!" exclaimed the viscount in astonishment, and he held out his arms, as though wishing to embrace her, but worn out by his recent agitation, he fell back on his bed motionless and lifeless.

"My father!—my cousin!" cried Ralph, advancing a few paces.

"It is too late," said Esperie, as she wiped away a falling tear,—"fly now, my cousin—fly quickly, lest the plague should lay hold on you."—But listen for a moment—present yourself to-morrow at the gate of the convent of the Chartreux; a faithful agent of mine will give you the key of the safe of which your father spoke, together with that of this house;—depend upon it, your interest shall not be neglected."

But still he hesitated, ashamed and penitent for having shown himself cowardly and ungrateful in the presence of so admirable a model of courage and devotion:

"The air which you now breathe is contagious," she added, "particularly for those who are not accustomed to it—fly, therefore, and I will attend to all."

And Ralph departed, his heart full of sorrow and remorse, unhappy, sick with terror, and unknowing what he had best do.

On the following evening, when the remains of the viscount were already reposing in the grave, and the keys of the house and of the safe had been duly delivered to his son, two men carried on a barrow, one stricken with the plague, whom they had found lying at the corner of a street near the door of an inn. Mademoiselle de Roussillon had him instantly placed in one of the best beds in the hospital, and summoned the physician, urging him to do all that his skill could devise to save the life of the patient.

That patient was Ralph de Vaillac, who had been abandoned by his debauched companions, as soon as they found him sick.

CONCLUSION.

About the beginning of September, the violence of the plague had considerably diminished; the persons attacked being fewer in number, and much more easily cured. A fortnight after, there was but a small number of sick either in the city or the hospitals, and by the end of the month the plague had entirely disappeared. Ebrard de St. Sulpice, who had never ceased to supplicate the Almighty on behalf of his suffering people, now resolved to have a solemn public thanksgiving, for that God had at length vouchsafed to look with compassion on that afflicted city.

A procession, composed of all that remained of the population, decimated as it had been by war and pestilence, moved in good order through the streets of the city, bearing wax tapers, and singing canticles of praise and thanksgiving.

First of all went the young girls robed in white, bearing an image of the Blessed Virgin; then the women, poor desolate widows, and after them the nuns, of the different orders, followed by the male children; then the trades, having each their respective banner, and last of all the clergy and the bishop himself, carrying with all respect the Most Holy Sacrament and the Sacred Caul[25] which had been preserved by Dadin de Hauteserre.

The procession entered the church, where the *Te Deum* was sung with an indescribable mixture of sorrow and rejoicing; every one thanked God for having escaped the plague, but wept at the same time the loss of a father, a husband or wife, a brother or sister, or a beloved child; there was not one there who had not to deplore some friend or relative. When the ceremony was finished, the crowd silently dispersed, but the bishop continued for long after, kneeling before the altar, pouring out the fulness of his heart before the Lord.

Just as he arose to return home, he was accosted by a tall figure, wrapped up in a large cloak, who made a sign that he wished to speak with him in private.

"We are alone here," said the prelate with his usual mildness, "speak, my child—what would you of me?"

The stranger looked around to assure himself that no one was near, then approaching the bishop;

"I am a Protestant," said he in a low, hesitating voice, "but the celestial virtues of one young Catholic have touched my inmost heart. Ralph de Vaillac wishes to return to the faith of his fathers, that faith which can alone excite so much charity and devotion."

Ebrard started with surprise. "Come home with me, my brother," said he, as he pressed the young man's hand, and raised his eyes to heaven with a sublime expression of joy, hope, and love; "we can there converse more freely on this subject."

And retiring through the sacristy, he conducted him to the palace.

Three months after, the Viscount Ralph de Vaillac, heir of his father's titles and estates, being carefully instructed by the prelate, abjured his errors in the cathedral church of Cahors, on the very day that the young Countess de Roussillon, subsequently known as Sister Mary of Mercy, received from the Pope the bull of approbation for the foundation of her Order, devoted to the spiritual and corporal relief of the sick, both in the hospitals and in their own dwellings.

The Castle of Roussillon, being a masculine tenure, passed to the Viscount de Vaillac, who faithfully promised his cousin to treat the vassals kindly. And he kept his word while he lived, but he did not long enjoy his new dignities for he died about a year after, from the effects of passed debauchery, regretted by all those with whom he then associated, and consoled by the sacred rites of the Catholic religion.

After him, the Castle of Roussillon fell into the possession of that famous Duc de Biron who subsequently died on the scaffold.

Sister Mary of Mercy, lived for many years after, peaceful and happy in the exercise of her sublime functions, beloved and venerated by all who knew her, the consoler of the afflicted, and the model of every virtue.

THE END.

NOTES TO CASTLE OF ROUSSILLON.

Note 1.—page 9. THE custom of planting the May-bush before the door of young maidens is preserved even in our days. It is decorated with garlands, crowns of flowers, and ribbons. It is also used in derision to indicate disdain or contempt, or to revenge an injury, in which case it is old bones, such as the heads of horses or cows, that are fastened to it. This is considered a serious injury, and exposes a young girl to the most bitter raillery. When the custom is observed by young people of the upper classes, they substitute for the May-bush a myrtle or orange-tree.—*Delpon.*

Note 2.—page 12. Francis the First introduced this custom to hide the scar of a wound which he had received while out on a party of pleasure.

Note 3.—page 20. *Milas* is a species of broth composed of black corn and maize.

Note 4.—page 20. *Fars* is composed of wheaten meal, eggs, white bread, lard, garlic and parsley.

Note 5.—page 22. It is an old custom in Quercy to celebrate a mass on the day after the wedding, for the souls of the deceased members of both families.

Note 6.—page 24. The official deposition of the city of Cahors affirms, that the victims had brought it on themselves, by provoking the Catholics.

Note 7.—page 49. The nuns of St. Clare were peculiarly ill-treated. On their refusal to apostatize and accept husbands, they were shut up in private houses, whence they were brought out every day to carry earth to the fortifications, then undergoing repairs, their only sustenance being bread and water. When it was found that their resolution was not to be shaken, they were ignominiously expelled the city. All the ecclesiastics underwent the same fate, and the inhabitants who refused to abandon their religion were thrown into prison, and their houses given up to pillage.—*Cathala Coture.*

Note 8.—page 52. At the massacre of St. Bartholomew, Queen Isabella, having no suspicion of what was in agitation, retired to rest as usual, and when she awoke in the morning, and was told of what had happened during the night: "Alas!" said she, "Does the King, my husband, know any thing of this?"—"Yes, please your majesty, it was he that had it done."—"Oh my God!" cried she, "what is this, or who could have advised him to do such a thing? My God, I beg—I implore thee to pardon him, for, unless through thy special mercy, I greatly fear his crime is beyond forgiveness!" and straightway she withdrew into her oratory and there continued for a long time to weep and pray.—*Brantome's Mémoirs, vol.* 2

Note 9.—page 83. This was the origin of the white grape of Fontainebleau.

Note 10.—page 101. Caverns are extremely numer ous in Quercy, many of them having been excavated by the Celtic people. There are also to be seen a great number of intrenchments made by the old Gauls, together with many fortified caverns, which doubtless served as places of refuge for the ancient inhabitants when the country was invaded.

Note 11.—page 133. The village of Roque-des-Arcs, so named, from the ruins there visible of some arches which formerly supported an aqueduct, constructed by the Romans to convey water from the Dordogne to Cahors.

Note 12.—page 133. The ruins of the castle of La Roque still exist, in the vicinity of that village; its large round tower forms a picturesque feature in the landscape.

Note 13.—page 165. St. Esperie was the daughter of Serenus and Blandine, the former held a distinguished rank in Quercy. After the death of her parents, her brother Clarus, in order to put an end to a feud which had long existed between the two families, would have forced her to marry Ellidius, a powerful lord of that country; but Esperie, having made a vow of perpetual chastity, fled and concealed herself in a lonely valley wherein the convent of Leyme was subsequently founded. She was discovered there some time after by Clarus, who, in concert with Ellidius, again pressed her to consent to the marriage. Esperie still refused, whereupon Ellidius, with the consent of her brother, cut off her head. She then took her head in her hand (as tradition says) and so pursued her murderers as far as a little streamlet since known as the Barbarian's Brook. The unhappy pair were seized with terror, fled the country; and wandered to and fro until they were at length apprehended and condemned to death by the Duke of Aquitaine.

The relics of St. Esperie were conveyed to St Céré, where many came to settle on that account. This was the origin of the town of Saint-Céré, about the year 55.—*Cathala Coture.*

Note 14.—page 219. This abbey was founded in 1221 by William de Cardailhac, bishop of Cahors, for the nuns of the Citeaux order; he had purchased it from another religious community.

Note 15.—page 229. The city of Cahors, seated on the right bank of the Lot, in a peninsula formed by that river, is overlooked by the mountains which border the opposite bank, thus forming around the city a sort of semi-circle. It appears certain that Cahors is not the ancient Uxellodonum, as some writers have advanced, but rather the former Divona, the capital of Cadurci, which received the name of *Civitas Cadurcorum*, whence its modern name. It is supposed that the word Divona, which in the celtic tongue signifies *fountain*, comes from the fountain of the Chartreux, situated near Cahors, and is one of the finest springs in France. The interior of the city is not very attractive, though of late years, it has been considerably improved by the addition of new and more regular streets. The rampart which extends on the high road leading from Toulouse to Paris, is decorated with several handsome buildings and a public promenade. There are at Cahors some Roman antiquities, a portico which must have belonged to the public baths, the theatre, or circus, which was evidently a large and tasteful fabric, together with some fragments of the aqueduct which bronght water to the city from a distance of more than six leagues.

Note 16.—page 229. The bridge of Valentré, at present surmounted by three towers, but formerly having five, was constructed in the thirteenth century from the fines imposed on the usurers called Cahursins; it has also been called the Devil's Bridge.

Note 17.—page 229. The exterior of the Cathedral of Cahors is very imposing. The inferior presents a vast nave, fifty metres in length, by fifteen in breadth. It is surmounted by three arches, of which two are in the form of a cupola. One of these has an elevation of thirty-two metres, and is forty-six in circumference; the other, of equal circumference, is but twenty-five metres high; both are without ornaments of any kind, but they are well proportioned and have a good effect. The other vault forms a third point Between the pilasters which support the domes, there runs on either side of the nave, at an elevation of ten metres, galleries adorned with balustrades, under which are several chapels. The lights belonging to that part of the church which is surmounted by the domes, all terminate in a semi-circle; those of the other part are ogival, and decorated with elegant, though fantastic ornaments in the Gothic style. It is sufficiently evident that the parts of the edifice were constructed at several different periods.

Note 18.—page 230. When a new bishop made his entry into Cahors, the Viscount de Lessac was bound to receive him at the limits of the county or earldom, and to conduct him to the cathedral and thence to the palace, holding the prelate's mule by the bridle. The viscount was to appear in a white jacket, his right leg bare, and its foot slipshod. When about to enter the suburbs, the viscount put on the bishop's cloak, and when he had alighted from his mule, he accompanied him to his seat. He subsequently served him at table in the same dress. The bishop's mule and his plate which was to be of silver gilt, and to the value of fifteen hundred livres, was the indemnification in lieu of this service, so that the viscounts generally dispensed with performing it, choosing rather to pay the penalty. —*Cathala Coture.*

Note 19.—page 231. Ebrard de St. Sulpice was consecrated in October, 1578, at the age of eighteen, and took possession of his bishoprick on the 10th of November; the Sorbonne had obtained a dispensation from the Pope because of his great talents and still greater virtues.—*Cathala Coture.*

Note 20.—page 231. Quercy was subject to the counts of Toulouse, but during the war of the Albigenses, the bishop of Cahors, at the head of his troops, wrung it from Count Raymond, and transferred it to the king of France.

Note 21.—page 232. Now the house of the Prefecture. It is a regular and majestic pile of building, situated in the Market Square near the Cathedral.

Note 22.—page 234. The castle of Mercuès, built in a very picturesque spot about a league from Cahors. was, before the revolution of 1789, the country-house of the bishops. Under the Roman domination it was a temple to Mercury, and hence its name of Mercuès.

Note 23.—page 256. Delpon's Statistics, History of Quercy, by Cathala Coture.

Note 24.—page 263. Contrary to the orders of the king of Navarre, the Calvinist soldiers sacked and pillaged the city for several days with a fury which respected neither age nor sex.

Note 25.—page 305. The sacred Caul, which is said to have belonged to our Lord Jesus Christ, which I have myself seen in the Cathedral, and which a priest solemnly exhibits to the faithful once a year, was given by Charlemagne to the chapter of Cahors. The continuator of Cathala Coture's History of Quercy, relates that the Calvinists threw it on the floor and trampled upon it, but that it was picked up by a poor woman who restored it to the chapter. Others assert that on the contrary she gave it to a domestic of Dadin de Hauteserre, who conveyed it to his lord, then the prisoner of the Viscount de Gourdon, and by his order, rewarded the woman with a small quantity of corn, the only thing that was left in his house. It is said, that De Hauteserre having hid it in his bosom, was, thereby miraculously delivered from prison, made his way on foot through the mountains, and on reaching his home, he carried the sacred caul to Lusech.

END OF THE NOTES.